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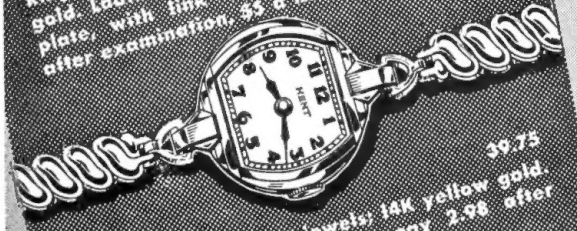

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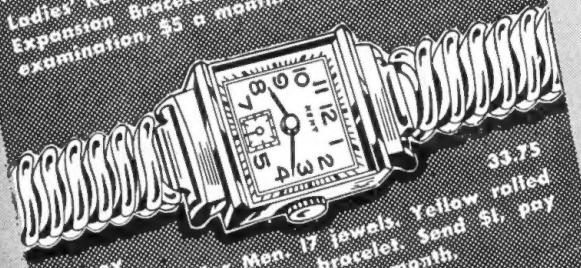

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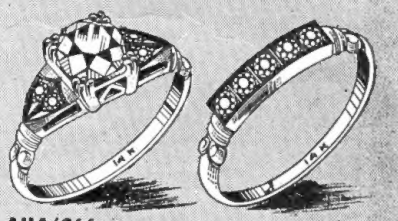

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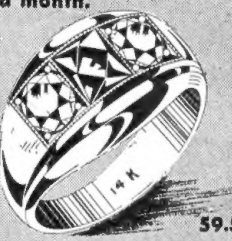

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VOLUME FORTY-ONE MARCH, 1947 NUMBER TWO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Seven Complete Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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APRIL ISSUE OUT MARCH 12TH!

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★ UP THE TRAIL ★

TO THOSE of us tenderfeet shackled to office desks and confined in our adventure seeking to the twice daily railroad trip to and from a mortgaged-plastered lean-to in the suburbs, the following words from Harry F. Olmsted surely will be received appreciatively. Harry's one of *Star Western's* writers who occasionally finds the time to get in a little honest-to-God raw living among men to whom the western wilderness is home and bread and body.

Let 'er rip, Mr. H.

The Navaho *hatali* wanted skins for his medicine kit and his blessings were ringing in our ears as we headed out for the deer country in a driving snowstorm—eight men and three pickups, arctic outfits for every man and grub to last the full twelve days, if necessary. Westward from Gallup to Sanders, southward to Saint John and Springerville, sleepy Mormon settlements nestling under the rimrocks at the foot of the White Mountains. Snow everywhere. Road tricky. Up a snow-choked road to Alpine, at the top of the world, then rolling down to Luna, an ancient Mexican *placita* at the foot of the Blues. On to Reserve, perched beside the San Francisco River, mecca of deer hunters. Road choked with hunters and their outfits. Everything from ancient jallopies to 1946 luxury wagons. Like a taxicab army rolling to battle.

The sun splits the overcast. Snow melting a little. Following a little-used road to Apache Ridge, with the marks of two cars before us. Maybe we'll have the ridge largely to ourselves. Road ends suddenly in a glade of pines, pinons and scrub oaks. Two camps already pitched—one a party of Navaho hunters who invariably follow a trail to the kill. Not so good.

The day is waning. Cold striking down. Numb fingers as we pitch the tents, rig the stoves and spread the sleeping bags. You'll need your extra blankets tonight, boys. Axe strokes ringing clear in the frosty air. Stomachs clamoring. The call goes up for ye old scrivener—maestro of the range. Stove roaring red. Military orders summoning the kitchen police to spud and onion peeling. Meat in the pot, boys. Onions, spuds, a can of green chili, another of tomatoes, a dash of garlic, rosemary, thyme and bay. Aroma of strong coffee filling the tent. The folding table is up, benches knocked together. Come and get it or I'll toss it out!

Down the hatches until not a crumb is left. Nothing like a hungry crew to build a cook's rep. Full-bellied men lolling underfoot while the kitchen drudges muck up the hardware. Cigarettes going. A touch of song. Swapping brags on tomorrow's chances. Swapping lies about forgotten kills. Disciples of Ananias going to town. Get in the pool, boys. Forty dollars for the first buck. A like amount for the largest. Fetch the cards and chips. Get your feet wet. Lowball, California Jack, stud. A dollar buys in, ten cent limit. Play 'em close to your belly and you can't go broke. How's your bluff? Fill up the coffee pot, chef, and close that tent flap. Trying to freeze us? Hard day tomorrow, nimrods; time to hit the sack. The sounds of other outfits pitching camp below us. Cripes, but these blankets are cold.

Up betimes. Cloudy, threatening, black as the inside of a boot. Bacon and eggs, hot cakes, coffee. Apple and a candy bar pocketed for lunch. Dirty dishes for the first gent in camp. Luck, boys. See you at noon with the first and the biggest. Up the mountain in the first promise of dawn. Wild wind whipping snow clouds across the moon, moaning through the pinetops. Colder than a banker's heart.

Rimming the mountain. Light growing. One step, then another. Ready for the big chance. Filled with the *qui vive* of the first day. Rustle of brush. Explosive *boom* of bouncing mule deer. Up with the rifle. Not light enough. Where are the horns? A heavy gun tolling off shots on the ridge. What's the fool shooting at? What good is a red cap against such wild bullet-sprayers?

Trailing the deer around the contour. Light growing full miraculously. Now I see them! Two does. Two more. Another, fat and barren. Where's the buck? No horns. Damn it, why am I so charming to women? Scram, gals. This is grim business, not romance.

Rising sun turning the pinetops and

(Please turn to page 126)

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He fired again into the brush.

DEATH-SONG ON THE SINGING WIRES • • •

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By Frank Bonham

CHAPTER ONE

First Command

LIEUTENANT THATCHER'S detail broke camp an hour after dawn, while the air was still crisp. The sun hung notched by the pinon-stippled hills, casting long and ungainly shadows from the signalmen moving about on the valley floor. It brought to shimmering life the thread of copper wire flashing back into the distance. Outside camp reeled a spindly line of new poles.

Thatcher gave close attention to the loading of the messwagon and ambulances. He made sure the fire had been covered with earth. While he performed these duties, he was conscious of the sidelong glances of the sergeant and the mock gravity of the other enlisted men.

First command. . . .

Thatcher had heard older officers joke about their first commands, about how scared they were, how bungling and stiff with dignity. Twenty years from now it perhaps would seem funny to Ross Thatcher that he had hardly slept in two weeks, for worrying if he was stretching the wire too tight or too slack;

He fired again into the brush.

SINGING WIRES • • •

By Frank Bonham

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about how much discipline he should exact from his men on an informal detail; about the possibility of Indian trouble.

At the Point they told you how to set security guards, load a wagon and feed your men. But they didn't tell you how to convince troopers with twenty years service on their sleeves that you knew more about soldiering than they did.

The ambulance drivers were waiting the order to stretch out. Private Moriarity had tapped in at the base of the last wired pole. He glanced up as the lieutenant stopped beside him.

"Can't raise him, sir," Moriarity said.

They had left Corporal Bruff at the raw adobe station five miles back. It was the lieutenant's privilege to guess what was wrong. None of the silent, seasoned men standing about were going to help.

Thatcher checked to see that his knife was in. "Maybe he's getting wood. Keep trying."

He mounted and gave the order to move on. The six ambulances with their gleaming rolls of wire lumbered up the slope. From the last wagon, wire spun smoothly off a creaking drum. Poles had already been set by the timber crew several miles ahead.

Sergeant Hicks came hurrying up. "Still can't raise him, Lieutenant. Reckon there's been trouble?" Hicks was a lean, tough old-army man. He was a born sergeant, reliable as a mule . . . if he liked you. He was in his middle forties; the story was that he'd refused a commission because he didn't want the responsibility. He was thin as a rake, with dry, sallow features and peppery sideburns.

"I doubt it," Thatcher said. "He may have overslept and left the switch out. I'll ride back and find out. Take over."

"Think it's wise to leave the command, sir? It's Indian country, you know."

Thatcher spoke sharply, mainly because he knew the sergeant was right. "There's been no trouble for six months. I'll go myself. Unless you don't feel competent to handle the job?"

"I had a little experience in the war, sir. I'll risk it."

The lieutenant hesitated, eyeing the sergeant angrily. "I want to check the poles on that ridge, anyway. It may be we should have used guys." He swung his pony and jogged down the shallow valley through the hills. He was disgusted with himself for having let the man take the conversation into channels where sarcasm lay ready.

But, as he rode, he felt confidence return. He was a dark man who wore his brass without flourish. His face had taken the imprint of the elements as the land itself had—sunburned, roughened by the wind. He knew how each detail of his job should be handled—according to the book; it was only when he let himself be drawn into an argument that he got into difficulty. He made a note to be as aloof with Hicks hereafter as the Great Stone Face.

The air grew warmer, though at six thousand feet it seldom grew uncomfortably hot in this lonely corner of Arizona Territory. Where the wind stroked the yellow grass of a high ridge, the signalman dismounted. He was thinking that in February the wind probably shrieked across this hogback like a bereaved squaw. With a coating of ice, the wire could damn well snap. There would have to be guys. They broke a man like a matchstick for blunders like that.

Suddenly, as he rode on, he felt a cool finger of anxiety slip down his spine. He didn't know why. It was nothing he had seen or heard. But his intuition had caught a scent.

All at once he looked up. The wire above his head was loose. Gently it sagged from cross-arm to cross-arm in easy loops. That meant a break somewhere.

The dry scrape of Sergeant Hicks' voice recurred: *Think it's wise to leave the command, sir? It's Indian country, you know!*

Thatcher drew his carbine, casually, trying to persuade himself he wasn't frightened. For himself, he wasn't. But if his command was wiped out because the sergeant failed to put out security guards, the blame would be his own. Now that he had come this far, he felt he must go on. The operator might be in trouble.

As he rode, his head turned continually. In the quiet of the morning he felt menace. He halted at the top of a rise. Below him, the land sloped away in great troughs, valley and ridge, valley and ridge, with the mountains in the distance. A half-mile away he saw the break.

In ten minutes he reached the spot. Maybe an eagle had dropped a rabbit on the wire. That had happened before. Maybe a splice had broken. As he looked up at the pole, the full impact of disaster struck him. A hundred-foot length had been cut out of the line and carried away. Apaches did that. You couldn't splice a gap.

As he sat there, trying to comprehend it, a puff of dust kicked up on the ground ahead of his horse. He heard the ball wail in a short arc across the hilltop. The sound of the rifle came an instant later. By that time, Thatcher was riding.

THE operator's shack was a mile ahead—if it still stood. He heard the unshod hoofs of the Indians' ponies behind him. He glanced back to see four paints sweeping across the dry summer grass. The riders were small brown humps on the horses' backs. The ponies

carried no saddles, no saddle-bags, no rolls of wire. They were closing in.

Ross Thatcher reached back and let his emergency roll of wire drop. He tried to loosen the coat-straps and failed. He bent across the low swell of the McClellan and let his dime-sized spur-rowels cut the pony. The horse began to reach. Across the second ridge he sighted the shack. *Thank God!* he thought. There was no sign of smoke at the adobe.

He fired a shot to attract Corporal Bruff's attention. Down there on the bench a man appeared in the adobe's portal. Thatcher saw him run from the cabin to the horse picketed a short distance away. He pulled the picket-pin from the ground and hurriedly led the horse through the door into the cabin. The lieutenant heard a ball snap past him with the sound of a popped neckerchief. The drumming of hoofs was close; the sweat of fear was on Thatcher's face. He hit the ground before the cabin.

Bruff's gun roared. Thatcher dove through the doorway and the horses swerved. Then he heard a hard animal cry and the sound of a man striking the ground.

"Damn' stinking devils!" Bruff panted.

Thatcher braced himself against the jamb and pulled a bead on one of the Apaches. He held his shot. The target was already out of effective range. His eye snapped to where the downed man was dragging himself after the others. Bruff took slow aim.

Thatcher said, "Hold it! They'll hang around to recover the body if we kill him. He's out of the fight anyway."

The Indians pulled off to the fringe of a motte of scruboak. One of them had recaptured the wounded man's pony. When he was a hundred yards from the cabin, another warrior rode out to assist him. The signalmen allowed them to draw away. They disappeared into the oaks.

After an hour Bruff saddled, rode out, captured the lieutenant's horse and returned to the shack. The key began to clatter. They looked at each other.

"That'll be the post, Lieutenant," Bruff said. His thick fingers began to take down the message with a stub pencil.

This was Thatcher's big moment; his chance to say, "Send fifty-man patrol at once. Signs of Indian uprising."

It would also be the chance for older officers to grin and say, "Poor young Thatcher! I'll bet he saw a wild turkey and decided it was Geronimo! He won't last a month out there even if he did go to the Point."

But if there *was* trouble, and he hadn't taken adequate steps to protect his command . . .

Bruff looked up. "They're wanting to know why the morning report hasn't gone in."

Thatcher started. "Tell them a splice broke," he said. "I'll want the usual amount of wire and spikes. Expect to reach Benton's Store by night." He hesitated. "Say a small bunch of Apaches was seen, apparently a raiding party. I want three men sent out to each station to stand twenty-four-hour guard."

Bruff looked relieved. He began to tap out the message. Thatcher went out. He heard the key still chattering when he rode off.

CHAPTER TWO

Benton's Store

THATCHER rejoined his detail with no comment as to his skirmish with the Apaches. The country was flattening out. In this dry land of few creeks and no trees, John Benton's place was an oasis. Thatcher had spent two days at Benton's Store, on Bitter Creek, last spring, checking the route he was to follow. Benton had come here twenty years ago with a wagon train of immigrants. The farmer was impressed with the way dry soil responded to water. He stayed on at Bitter Creek, digging irrigation ditches and putting Mexicans to farming the land for him. In his big, cool adobe trading post, he sold everything the cowboy, trapper and traveler might want.

Poles had stepped across the valley where Benton's farms lay and eastward for ten miles. The pole camp rested there. At sunset Thatcher brought the wire to a point two hundred yards north of the trading post. They made camp and he and Sergeant Hicks rode on to the post. As they racked their horses they heard a girl's laughter. Recollection threw a thin, bright ray across Thatcher's gloomy thoughts. He had almost forgotten the Benton girls.

The interior of the store was a wilderness of smells and goods, everything that could be stacked, hung or shelved. Strings of red chilis, coffee and hams made the big room fragrant. Crates and heaps of merchandise formed islands about the floor. A girl sat on a counter near the door, a stack of Indian blankets beside her. The man who sat alongside looked up. He was a big bald-headed American in a buckskin shirt and Army trousers.

The girl recognized Thatcher. "If we'd just known you were coming, Lieutenant, we'd have called out the color guard. Did I hear you pounding stakes up there?"

"Unfortunately, you'll hear us pulling them up in the morning," Thatcher said. "Is your father here, Miss Jean?"

Jean Benton pouted. "I thought you'd come to see me." She jumped down, a lithe, full-bosomed girl with dark hair and fair skin. There were no pastels about John Benton's

older daughter. Her lips were red, her eyes dark blue.

Thatcher smiled. "Just an excuse," he said. "As a further excuse, I'm dragging seventy miles of wire behind me. I'd like to replace a few things in the messwagon before we go on."

"This the new line to Fort Grant," the man on the counter asked.

"In that general direction," Thatcher said.

Jean led him around mounds of merchandise to a door in the rear. She opened it and went through. Thatcher waited. He heard John Benton's voice, the voice of an invalid. "Well, send him in!"

When Jean came back she was smiling. "You could really give me your order," she said, "but Dad would scalp me. It's not every day he gets to yarn with an Army man."

She went back to where Sergeant Hicks and the man in the buckskin shirt were talking.

Thatcher moved into Benton's room. He was on the point of closing the door when Benton, from his chair by the window, said curtly, "Leave it open, Lieutenant—I like to see. Particularly when government beef contractors are in the store. They'll steal anything from your tobacco to your daughter.

Benton was a long, wasted figure in the armchair, a blanket across his knees. Despite his tartness, Thatcher liked him. He had a big nose, a thin Scotch mouth, brushy brows and eyes cold as a December sky.

Thatcher shook hands. For a few minutes they talked of the weather, crops, politics. Behind the trader's eyes was a mind as sharp as a skinning knife. He asked the same question the beef contractor had. "I suppose you're heading for Fort Grant?"

Thatcher smiled. "The fewer people who know where I'm heading, the less trouble I'll have."

Benton shrugged. "Your first command, isn't it?"

Thatcher hesitated. "How did you know?"

The trader's dry lips smiled. "You've got the look on you. You're carrying your dignity like a basket of eggs. Relax, Lieutenant. There won't be any trouble. If there is, you'll know how to handle it when it happens."

"As a matter of fact—" Thatcher halted. He stopped himself from telling Benton of the morning's ruckus. It had been merely a bunch of bronco warriors out for some hell; the less he made of it before a veteran frontiersman, the better.

"We ought to have a quiet enough time, at that," Thatcher said.

"Haven't heard of any trouble," Benton agreed. He nodded toward the front. "Except from Jim Shepley. He gets around, all over the reservation. He hears talk before you men ever do. He says some of them are getting pretty damned restless about trespassing."

"They'll get over it."

The silver music of Jean's laughter came to them. Benton frowned and his fist rapped the chair-arm several times. He ended the conversation abruptly. "You might as well be getting fixed up. My other girl will help you. Jean's supposed to be taking care of Shepley." He called, "Sharon!"

A DOOR opened and Thatcher remembered her, though she had stayed in his mind less vividly than her sister. She was blonde, shorter than Jean. Where Jean was bold, Sharon was reserved.

"Help the lieutenant to whatever he wants, daughter. That's in cash, Lieutenant?"

"Gold."

Jean was lighting lamps about the store. Gloom gathered mustily in corners. Sharon kept track of purchases while Thatcher and Sergeant Hicks carried the goods to the porch. Shepley spoke to Thatcher as he set down a sack of cornmeal.

"Got my wagons right over yonder, Lieutenant. Be glad to haul your doin's up to camp for you. Save bringing an ambulance down."

Thatcher thanked him. "We'd appreciate it."

Shepley stuffed coarse tobacco in a stained meerschaum pipe. When he lighted it, the hard planes of his face came into relief; his lips were wide and hard; the brows strong. There was fathomless confidence in the face.

"Came off all right in that little scrape this morning, I hear." He said it casually, as though remarking on something he had read in the paper.

Thatcher blinked. Hicks couldn't have told him; Hicks didn't know. "You weren't riding a paint horse without a saddle this morning, by any chance?" he asked.

Shepley laughed. "You may be working for the Great White Father, but Jim Shepley's the Apache's uncle. I heard about it on the way up today. I'm going north now to sell a little beef and bring back some hides and blankets. I heard that four anxious bucks had their ears knocked down by Gray Horse for cutting a telegraph line."

Thatcher regarded him closely. "I hope so. You don't think there'll be a repetition?"

"Probably not. Not until the line is complete. You can understand how they feel. Uncle Sam gives them the land. But he reserves the right to build telegraph lines across it, send troopers over it, start forest fires and pinch their squaws' rumps if they feel like it. It ain't right."

"We're interested in nothing but getting across this country the quickest way."

Shepley shrugged. "If you're just going to cut across the southeast corner of the reserva-

tion, like you're doing, it's probably all right. But if you mean to swing northeast, why—"

"Where I'm going to swing is government business; Gray Horse will have to like it."

"Bet he don't," Shepley said. He picked up the meal sack and carried it to his wagon.

Jean and Sharon were talking with the sergeant when Thatcher went inside. Sharon said, "Father wants you and the sergeant to have dinner with us, Lieutenant. If you'd sleep in the store tonight, too, we'd be happy."

"Think the men will be all right?" Thatcher asked the sergeant.

Hicks grinned. "They can look out for theirselves, any time we get a chance to eat civilized chuck and sleep under a roof."

In a large, low-ceilinged room hung with Indian blankets, they stuffed themselves with the kind of a meal soldiers dream about. Corn-and-chili dish; golden *camotes* with fresh butter. There were steaks to make a man let his belt out. Jean and Sharon sat down after all the men had been served. Hicks ate like a hungry dog. Shepley ate slowly, deliberately, stopping once to compliment the cooks. Benton had Thatcher sit next to him and kept talking steadily.

After dinner, Thatcher excused himself. "I'll have to ride up to camp and see that they haven't built the cook-fire under the messwagon."

Benton spoke quickly as he left the table. "Jean, why don't you walk up with him and see how Feliciano is?"

"All right, Dad."

They walked up the road in the still, cool darkness. On the bed of the valley lay a faint river-mist; beside the river a collection of Indian hogans was revealed by the light of supper fires. They stopped while Jean inquired after a workman who had been injured. Afterward, they walked on to the signal camp. The presence of this dark, vivacious girl set up a tingling in the lieutenant. She had a hundred questions to ask about Army life.

One of the men was singing when they reached the camp. As they moved close enough to hear the words, Thatcher felt the blood surge to his cheeks. It was a bawdy barracks song. He glanced down at Jean, seeing a puzzled expression on her face. For a moment he had a hope that it had been so rank she did not understand it. Then she said faintly, "Maybe I'll wait here."

Thatcher strode ahead. Despite his embarrassment, he knew it was his own fault for having brought her here without warning. The men were sitting about the fire. Private Moriarity was the singer; Corporal Faitz was accompanying him on a Jew's-harp. One of the other men was taking a pull at a bottle. He lowered it and passed it to Moriarity.

Faitz saw him first. The nasal twang of the Jew's-harp died. He scrambled to his feet. "'Tensh-*hut!*"

They found their feet hurriedly, though two didn't stand too steadily. Moriarity glanced at the lieutenant and raised the bottle. He took a drink and set the bottle down carefully. He got up and reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco.

Thatcher snapped, "The command was attention."

Moriarity said, "Escuse me, sir." His teeth bit a generous corner off the black Navy plug. He didn't hurry about replacing the tobacco.

THATCHER walked over and took the plug out of his hand. He threw it in the fire. Moriarity's bluff Irish face darkened. "Look here, now, Lieutenant!" he complained. "We ain't going to have brass poisoning in camp, are we?"

Thatcher kicked the bottle. "Pour that stuff out."

Moriarity met his stare. He had had enough whiskey to lose his inhibitions; not enough to be good-natured. "Sir," he said, "the Articles of War forbid cruel and unusual punishments."

Someone snickered. Thatcher glanced at the faces about him. They were sober, except for the eyes. They were the faces of men seeing someone in a tough spot and wondering if he had the cleverness to get out of it.

The lieutenant picked the bottle up, then slammed it against a rock. To the other men, he said, "At ease." He told Moriarity, "Walk over there beyond the mules." He removed his tunic and followed.

They confronted each other, away from the light of the fire. Moriarity appeared sullen but nervous. Slowly, his palms rubbed his thighs.

"We're a long way from a stockade," Thatcher said. "I'll have to improvise a punishment in keeping with the offense. I don't think you'll find it cruel or unusual. On the other hand, if you still want to apologize . . ."

"Is this as man to man," Moriarity asked, "or will I be shot for striking an officer after we go back?"

"I'm wearing no insignia," Thatcher said.

Moriarity said: "Ah!" and smashed a right to the officer's face. It struck Thatcher on the cheek-bone, hard.

Moriarity stepped in. He was a shorter man, built like a draft-horse: blunt, solid, close to the ground. His fists carried the weight of his shoulders. As he fought, he snorted, his teeth shining faintly in the dark.

Thatcher found he could no more stop all those blows than he could have dodged a handful of corn. He got his chance when the trooper threw a haymaker that missed. Moriarity was off-balance. Thatcher's fist came down

like a hand-axe. Blood came in a dark gush from the other's nose. He floundered away, blindly, his hands before him as he searched for his opponent.

The lieutenant followed, slamming lefts and rights to Moriarity's head. It was like hitting rock. Thatcher fired one at his belly, but the Irishman's arms doubled across his middle and he took the blow on an elbow. Then he came recklessly back at Thatcher. A solid, punishing smash on the ear sent the officer down. The private stood above him, staring down at his slowly stirring body.

The concussion was a ringing blackness in Thatcher's head. He found himself trying to get up, resting on hands and knees. Vaguely he realized Moriarity was coming in again, his foot swinging at his head. He knew this, but lacked the force to evade it. Then he heard Moriarity swear, saw him stumble.

Jean Benton said angrily, "Indian fighter, are you! You fight more like an Apache than a trooper!"

Moriarity hesitated; while he was trying to digest her sarcasm, Thatcher got up. Moriarity understood what to do about that. He came in again, viciously.

Thatcher went back four steps while Moriarity threw blows from every corner. The instant he slowed, Thatcher shot one at the fourth button of his shirt. It connected and the soldier gasped. He doubled up, stumbling into the other man. He slumped to his knees and fell forward.

Thatcher waited until the private was able to get up again, sick and shaky. Moriarity stood swaying before him. Thatcher said, "No more liquor, Moriarity. No more tobacco-chewing when the command is attention. Agreed?"

Moriarity's eyes closed slowly and opened again. "Stand corrected, sir." His eyes stood uncorrected. They were saying, *Will you be as much of a man when the arrows are as thick in the air as cottonwood down?*

Thatcher was wondering the same thing.

CHAPTER THREE

Night Visit

THEY started back to the trading post. Jean looked up at him and stopped. "You've got a cut on your face." He let her dab at his cheek with her handkerchief.

"I'd have worse than that," he said, "if you hadn't pushed him."

"I like a fight," Jean said, "but I like it fair. You had him whipped, up to then." She was silent a moment, and they walked on. Then: "Ever been in an Indian fight, Ross?"

He liked her using his first name. He liked her taking his arm. "Once, on the way out here. It wasn't very much of a fight."

"They used to raid us about once a month, until Dad got them civilized. I think," she said, "I'd like the Army. Travel, excitement. I wasn't made to stay in one place long."

"The way to fix that up," said Thatcher, "is to marry an Army man." He caught her quick, quizzical look. Her eyes had the soft sheen of moonlighted water; her throat, above the Mexican bodice, was satin smooth.

"No Army man's ever asked me," Jean said.

Thatcher turned her to him, holding her by the arms. "I'll bet you've said that to a dozen of them," he told her. "And I'll bet this is what they've done!" He pulled her close, let his arm catch her firmly and kissed her. Her lips were smooth and warm; her perfume swirled through his head.

It was an effort to release her and say, ". . . And then I'll bet they've said, 'Will you marry me, Miss Jean?' Only I've had girls before, and I know you're the kind that always says she isn't quite ready. So I'm not going to make a fool out of myself."

Jean looked a little stunned. She, too, had been playing; but her face was sober now. Then the dark eyes grew angry. "If I were a cat," she said, "you'd have scratches all over your face. If a man's not willing to take that risk, he oughtn't to kiss a girl. Good night!"

She ran up the steps to the store. Thatcher felt as though he had stood too close to a whirlwind. His emotions had been given a spin.

Benton's voice called out to him as he went into the store, where, now, only one lamp burned. He went back to the man's room.

The trader squinted at him. "Ain't been scrapping with enlisted men, I hope?"

"I've been disciplining one."

Benton grunted. Then: "Play chess?" He had a chessboard already set up.

"Used to. Spot me a rook and a bishop and I'll take you on."

They played for an hour. Benton won three games straight. As he was replacing the pieces in a box, he said off-handedly, "Have a nice walk with Jean?"

For an instant, Thatcher thought Jean must have told the old man about the scrap. Yet he knew that would have been out of character for her. He said, "I did that. She's a fine girl."

"She's a little bit of a worry," Benton remarked. "She's not a quiet girl, like her sister."

"A long way from it."

Benton had finished packing the chessmen, but he kept fussing with the box, moving it about on the table, frowning, fumbling. "I'd like to see her well married some day, Lieutenant. She's too quick to play; some day, God forbid, she'll play with the wrong man

and get burned." He stared at Thatcher.

Thatcher's chuckle was strained. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that, sir. She's a good girl."

"You never know what even a good one will get into sometimes. You, Lieutenant," Benton said, his eyes coming up quickly, "you ever thought about how much a good wife can mean to a man?"

Thatcher had been no more stunned when Moriarity hit him. "Why not exactly. I haven't given it much thought."

"Should. In the Army a man's wife is as much responsible for his promotions as the man himself, Jean," he said, "is the Army type. Likes people. Mixes well. You could do a lot worse."

Thatcher's color was high. "I'm sure I could. But—"

Benton waved a skinny hand. "Not trying to sell you anything, Lieutenant. But you'll be back this way one day. Think about it. Marriage wouldn't hurt either of you a bit." He said brusquely, "Your room is the one behind the hardware. There's a candle burning in it. Good night."

Thatcher lay there in the small room a long time, half-amused, half-worried. It had happened too quickly to evaluate it properly. He liked Jean, there was no mistake about that; but he liked her sister, too. And he didn't think he was ready to tie himself down.

He could see the trader's point; but he'd be damned if he'd plunge into matrimony so that John Benton could sleep nights.

Then he began to imagine himself married. Jean filled the requirements for an Army man, all right. But how long would one man interest her? She was too damned wild. If she hadn't been, she wouldn't have let him kiss her.

Sharon would be as faithful as an old hunting dog. When you talked to her, you had glimpses of deep, exciting currents under the surface. But would she try to put down roots every time the wagon slowed?

There was one other point he could not get out of his mind. As an officer, he was still on trial. He was still a junior, suspected by the older men, not deemed worthy of a really important duty. He didn't intend to take a wife into that kind of a set-up.

SMALL things will wake a man trained to sleep on a hair-trigger. In Ross Thatcher's case, it was an odor. He found himself dreaming of the apple-blossom fragrance of Jean's perfume; then he realized he was not dreaming. It was in the room.

Something fell softly to the floor and Thatcher put his legs over the side of the cot. "Jean?"

The door closed gently and footsteps retreated through the deserted, unlighted store.

Thatcher pulled on his trousers and thrust his feet into his boots. He lit the candle. By its light he saw his tunic lying on the floor near the threshold. He picked it up, but he knew immediately what would be missing. His orders. The papers setting down the route he would follow across the reservation!

He strode into the big hardware room. It was a wilderness of shadowy mounds, heaps and counters. He saw nothing at first. Then he realized someone was standing in the center of the floor, watching him. He walked deliberately to her. She started to back off but he seized her around the waist. "So you're getting even for tonight, are you? Too high and mighty for a mere lieutenant to kiss—"

All at once he knew his blunder. The hair of this girl was blond. It was Sharon . . .

The girl stepped back. "I—I don't understand. I heard someone in the store and came out to see who it was." Her eyes were large and frightened.

It occurred to Thatcher that he had been only half-wrong. There was a breath of sachet about Sharon. It was the same scent Jean used. He said, "Someone has just stolen orders from my tunic. I thought at first it was your sister. I recognized her perfume. Now I see that you both use the same."

She was less frightened now. He saw more spirit in her face than he had thought she possessed. "If you're accusing me of stealing them, Lieutenant, you're at liberty to search me." She stood there in a ruffled nightgown and a blue flannel robe.

Thatcher was silent a moment. Then: "I'm sorry. I thought it must have been you or Jean."

She pressed her lips firmly together. "You don't think it possible you could have imagined it? Why would either of us want your papers?"

Thatcher hadn't reasoned that far ahead. "Someone did," he said lamely.

Sharon drew her robe about her. "It's just possible you missed them. If you don't find them, I'm sure we can in the morning. Or perhaps you lost them in your little scuffle with Private Moriarity."

She left him. Thatcher went back and closed the door. He made a search of the room and his clothes, but the orders were gone. It hadn't occurred to him, before, that he might have lost them during the fight with Moriarity. It was evident that Jean had brought home a report of the night's doings.

The whole thing was illogical; that either of the girls had wanted the papers, or that one of them had actually broken into his room. As he got back in bed he sniffed the air thoroughly. There was no odor at all but the rancid smell of the smoking candle.

The detail left shortly after dawn. Thatcher had been unable to find the papers on the ground where he and Moriarity had fought, or in the store. He was convinced that they had been stolen.

He remembered Jim Shepley's interest in his route. It occurred to him that the bald-headed man might be operating some kind of game on the reservation which he did not want reported. Government contractors had an unsavory reputation in the Territory. They were inclined to charge the government forty thousand dollars for nine-thousand-dollar schoolhouses. Their beef was disposed to stringiness, though they received top price for it.

Yet there was nothing he could do but keep his eyes open. He knew every creek and pass on the route; had he not memorized it, he would have had to ride back and ask for duplicate copies. The chances were he would have been bound back to the States in a month's time. Officers were expected to be able to hold on to their orders.

At noon he called Sergeant Hicks. "Better ride ahead to the pole camp and get them moving. I've sketched a map of the next twenty-five miles. Report back tonight."

But the sergeant had not reported back at sundown. At nine o'clock, deeply disturbed, Thatcher set out pickets and turned the men in. In the morning he scanned the country to the northeast and saw nothing but the rising, broken plain, ascending to the gray-blue shoulders of the Mogollon Range. Finally he saddled and rode out.

He had ridden about two miles when he heard a shot behind. He turned, waiting for the horse loping toward him. The rider was Jean Benton.

She pulled up alongside him. "I'm beginning to think you're avoiding me," she charged. "I ride all the way out here and find you're out in the sagebrush somewhere."

"Matter of fact," Thatcher said, "I had the feeling last night that *you* were avoiding *me*."

"If I weren't unusually bright," Jean smiled, "that would be over my head. You weren't referring to these?" She pulled some papers from the pocket of her buckskin riding habit.

Thatcher grabbed his orders from her. "All through with them?" he asked.

Jean's nose tilted. "It happens that I found them in a keg of nails, in the store. How they got there, I don't know. Sharon told me you were upset."

"You seem to tell each other everything."

"Not quite. Some things we keep for our diaries."

Thatcher realized someone might easily have copied the contents and discarded them, so that his relief was not complete; but at least he had them. He thanked her. "I wish I could ride back with you," he said, "but I'm hunting a lost sergeant. There's always something, in this business."

"I'll ride with you."

He glanced toward the mountains. "It's your business," he said, "but if you were my daughter I'd give you a spanking and send you home. I'm not quite sure just how quiet the Apaches are this season."

At eleven o'clock he sighted the pole camp on the rim of a mesa. Unwired poles leading up to it were an orderly line of crosses. He saw the great wagons, loaded with freshly-cut lodgepoles bucked free of branches and notched for the cross-arms. He saw with relief that Sergeant Hicks' horse stood with the others.

Then he noticed the men standing in the shade of one wagon. There was something ominous about their attitudes. Thatcher understood it when he saw the man stretched out on a blanket on the ground.

CHAPTER FOUR

Badlands Guide

HICKS was flushed and tight-lipped. "It's Bowers, the scout," he told the lieutenant. "I rode ahead with him to spot the stakes. We were in Icehouse Canyon when they jumped us. Must've been a dozen bucks. Two of 'em had carbines. They weren't out for scalps or we wouldn't 'a got out."

Thatcher knelt beside the wounded man. His eyes were closed and death was on his face. The ball had gone into his shoulder. Private Reevis sat by him with a canteen.

"That ball ought to come out," Reevis said dully. "He might have a chance if it was out."

Hicks asked, "You any good at cutting, Lieutenant? I seen Captain Rice take a man's leg off at the knee, once, after a wagon run over it. This man ought to be took care of."

And if you're worth a damn, his eyes said, *you'll take care of him.*

Thatcher felt the sweat come out on his upper lip. But he took his knife out of his pocket. "Does someone have a stone?"

Private Reevis carried the knife off to the tool-wagon. Thatcher unbuttoned Bowers' shirt and pulled his boots off. He noticed the rowel of one of his spurs. It was clotted with slate-colored clay, not a usual type of earth in this country. Reevis brought the knife back, razor-sharp.

Thatcher found the blackish hole where the bullet had gone in. For just an instant he thought he would not be able to cut. The knife hovered. Then the point dropped.

He probed deeply, finding nothing. He was marveling at the slight flow of blood when the blade touched metal. The significance of

it did not come home until he had worked the scarred ball of lead from the hole. It was someone else who voiced it.

"He's quit."

Jean went off and stood by herself while they buried the scout. Thatcher stood stolidly beside a wagon, sickness turning clammily in his stomach. He had laid the slug and knife on the wagon tail-gate. He glanced at them and wondered vaguely how a carbine happened to be firing a small-caliber bullet.

Sergeant Hicks came up, leading their horses. "Sir," he said, "something's got to be done about this."

Thatcher was silent, his eyes on Hicks' lean face. "What would you suggest?"

Hicks slapped his thigh with his gauntlets. "That's for you to say, Lieutenant. But I'm damned if I'd take a detail into hostile country with no more protection than we've got."

"You seem pretty sure it's hostile country."

Hicks stared at him. "If you've got to see scalps to be convinced, I reckon you won't have long to wait."

"I know this," Thatcher said. "Trader Benton and the scouts I talked to before we left the post assured me there was nothing to worry about. I know that if I take the outfit back with our job unfinished, I'll be hooted out of camp."

Hicks' mouth tightened. He did not reply.

"So I'm going ahead by myself," Thatcher said, "to read sign on these Indians of yours. I have a suspicion the only war-dance they did before setting out this morning was over a pile of silver dollars. You'll return immediately to the other detail, Sergeant."

Hicks pulled a brisk salute. "Yes, sir. But I'd advise you to be careful."

Thatcher walked to where his and Jean's horses stood. "You may as well ride back as far as the wire camp with the sergeant."

Jean was looking up at the mountains. "You don't know those canyons, do you?"

"I've got a map."

She swung into the saddle. "You've got better than that—a guide."

The girl spurred across the mesa and he mounted hastily and followed. He got as far in arguing with her as he expected to. She had made up her mind to accompany him to Icehouse Canyon, and not all the lieutenants in the Signal Corps could dissuade her.

Through growths of piñon and incense cedar they ascended to a high country of larger trees and rougher canyons. Thatcher saw no trail, but Jean seemed to know where she was going. They crossed three minor ranges, to pause above a long, twisting defile at the base of a chain of jagged peaks.

"There's Icehouse Canyon." Jean pointed down.

Thatcher experienced a crawling sensation along his spine. According to the map, the attack should have taken place directly below this point. His eyes searched the pines cloaking both sides of the deep gorge. The warm, pitchy air carried no sound but the distant rush of white water. In all the acres spread out beneath them there was no visible movement.

Jean started down. Suddenly, across the canyon, Thatcher sighted a white scar in the underbrush. It was several moments before he recognized the long, tapering apron of a mine dump. Jean saw it too.

"That's funny," she said. "I've never heard of any mining in this section. Let's have a look."

It was near the bottom, on the opposite side of the canyon, so that they had to cross the shallow stream. Thatcher was not surprised, this time, when he discovered wagon tracks stamped deeply into the earth. The tracks led down the canyon. He knelt to examine them. His forefinger tapped the earth beside the sharp rut out of an iron tire. Some of the dirt fell into the rut. When he stood up, he had a little better understanding of what had happened to Scout Bowers.

Jean was excited. "Why, this thing's new, Ross! It can't be over a year old. I thought it must be an old Spanish mine. You don't suppose—"

Something stirred in the dark tunnel. It could have been a frog plopping into the stagnant water which had collected on the footwall, except that frogs did not whistle as they passed. A moment later the echoes of a rifle-shot poured down the canyon.

THATCHER pushed Jean and she stumbled away to fall beside a boulder. The lieutenant, his Navy pistol coming up, pivoted to search the brush beside the creek. He saw the smoke in a wolf-willow, and fired. If they were facing Apaches, he preferred to make a run for it. Indians had unpleasant ways of getting people out of caves. If they were whites, he would take the tunnel and hope the men got around to searching for them in a couple of days.

Jean settled it by darting toward the horses. "Let's get out of here!"

He followed her, firing again into the brush as he heard a bullet whine off the ground between them. They hit saddle as the brush moved. Thatcher had a glimpse of a gray shirt; he sent another shot at it and there was a chaotic threshing of brush. The gunman was down. But there was no way of telling whether he had been alone.

As they went down the trail there was another shot and then silence drifted over the canyon. For ten minutes Jean kept her pony at a lope. She crossed the stream and took a

zig-zag route up the mountain. She didn't pull the horse in until they had gained the ridge.

Thatcher said reflectively, "No danger at all, just like you said. The Indians in these parts won't do any worse than kill you."

"Those weren't Indians," the girl snapped. "If they had been, we'd have been cooked. We'd never have known what hit us." She rode on.

Night was gathering in the pockets of the range as they neared the pole camp. After the trouble in Icehouse Canyon, neither of them had any notion of trying to ride back to the post by night. Thatcher had the ambulance cleared and installed Jean in it. . . .

Breakfast was sizzling over the cook-fire when Jean Benton showed up in the morning. She had somehow contrived to make herself look as fresh as ever. Here, Thatcher reflected, was a girl who could take the jolts of Army life without breaking down. John Benton's suggestion didn't seem so ridiculous, now. And yet between him and anything like that lay a wide gulf. He had come to a point where he must force ahead through the mountains or turn back. What happened in the next few hours would either prove him an officer capable of handling a tough assignment, or a soldier whose fights would be made from behind the rampart of a desk.

Thatcher instructed the corporal in charge of the detail to hold it where it was until further orders. They started back to the wire camp. The sun was high and hot when they arrived. A crew of men was hauling back on the shining copper strand while the man on the pole made it fast to the insulator. Moriarity sat on the tail-gate of a wagon. As Thatcher approached, he stood up with no great show of sprightliness. Thatcher returned his salute.

"Where is Sergeant Hicks?"

Private Moriarity looked surprised. "We reckoned he was with you, sir."

"I sent him back yesterday noon."

The soldier blinked but ventured no guesses. Desertion was a serious matter. Thatcher hesitated a moment. There were only five saddles in camp and each must be filled by a competent, loyal trooper for what lay ahead. How loyal would a man be who had suffered a whipping at his hands?

"Saddle one of the horses and draw fifty rounds of ammunition," he told the private abruptly. "We're going back to look for Hicks."

The Irishman rubbed his jaw. "The desert's a big place, Lieutenant."

"Not when you know where to look. I'm banking he's gone back to Benton's Store." He said, "Bowers, the scout, was murdered yesterday. Sergeant Hicks said he was shot by Indians." He brought the scarred pellet of lead from his pocket. "I took this out of Bowers' shoulder. Hicks said they were shooting carried a .32 caliber gun. "I don't see—"

Private Moriarity stared at the slug. He seemed to be recalling that Sergeant Hicks carried a .32 caliber gun. "I don't see why he'd—"

"Neither do I; but we're going to find out."

With Moriarity and four others, he and Jean moved back toward Benton's Store. They made the ten-mile ride in three hours, arriving in the middle of the afternoon. Indians were working in the fields where the irrigation ditches were rich, dark stripes across the earth. A train of wagons was drawn up before the post. Jim Shepley, the beef contractor, was back from his trading trip to the villages.

Shepley was on the porch when they drew up. His bald head was beaded with sweat; he held a cup of water he had dipped from an *olla*. He squinted at Thatcher's horsemen. "Not going back, Thatcher?" he exclaimed.

The lieutenant cuffed dust from his cap. "I'm not a man to die for false principles," he said. "It begins to look like you were right. One of my scouts was murdered in Icehouse Canyon."

Shepley wagged his head. He drank part of the water and threw the rest on the ground. "Miss Jean ought to have known better than that, even if you didn't. What'll you do now?"

"Go back. I've wired the post to send out fifty men to escort my materials back. We'll meet them here."

Shepley nodded. "It's hard going. But you'll get farther in the army with only a retreat against your name, than a massacre."

"On your way back, Jim?" Jean asked Shepley.

"Tucson this time. You caught us just in time. Just told the old man to put my jug of rum to the back of the shelf for me."

He went down the steps and the skinners climbed the great wheels of the wagons. They were massive six-mule freight wagons with tarps lashed across their loads. Shepley went down the line, checking ropes. Thatcher called after him. "Haven't seen my sergeant, have you?"

"No. Lost him?"

"Looks that way. These regulars are good for about two years. Then they have to break away for a little fuffooraw. But I'll have some skin off this one's hide."

CHAPTER FIVE

Forbidden Silver

THE wagons rattled down the valley, their dust drifting across the broken hills as they sloped west for Tucson. Jean was staring at

Thatcher. "What did you mean, you're going back? You didn't tell me."

Moriarity was regarding him with frowning wonder.

"I didn't tell the post, either," Thatcher said. "But I'm not discussing my business with every trader who crosses our trail. We're going to have a damn good look around for Hicks."

He went into the post. John Benton had seen nothing of the non-com. Jean disappeared for a moment. It was the opportunity Thatcher had been looking for. He strode back through the big, dim room. He didn't want Shepley to get too far away. There were a few things he had left unsaid, because if the beef contractor took exception to them some innocent people might be hurt real badly.

He was on the threshold when Sharon called his name. Blonde and slender, she hurried through the sprawling heaps of merchandise. When she reached him, she did not seem to know how to begin.

"I—I lied to you the other night, Ross."

Thatcher smiled. "I know. And you hid my orders in a keg of nails after you'd copied them."

Her eyes widened. "But if you knew—"

"I didn't. Not until Jean told me where she'd found them. Who told you to do it?"

She bit her lip. "Jim Shepley. I thought I was doing right, Ross, and now I'm not sure. He said you were leading your men to death, that if he could just find out where you intended to go, he might be able to turn you aside; use his influence with the men he knows at the fort, or something like that."

"He goes to a lot of trouble for a dozen army men," Thatcher said. "I'm glad you told me. It makes me certain of something I was guessing at before."

As they rode, Thatcher figured. Shepley counted eleven men, two to each wagon. If there was trouble, the odds would not be good. They were close enough, now, that the dust of the wagons still lingered in the air. He pulled in beside Moriarity. Moriarity was stiff and silent.

"How are you in a scrap?" Thatcher asked him.

Moriarity's head turned. "I don't know that six men against one would be counted a scrap, sir."

"How about six against twelve? You know what we're going to find in those wagons, don't you? Silver ore. Probably the richest in Arizona. Shepley's hauling it all the way to the reducers at Tombstone, so it must assay high."

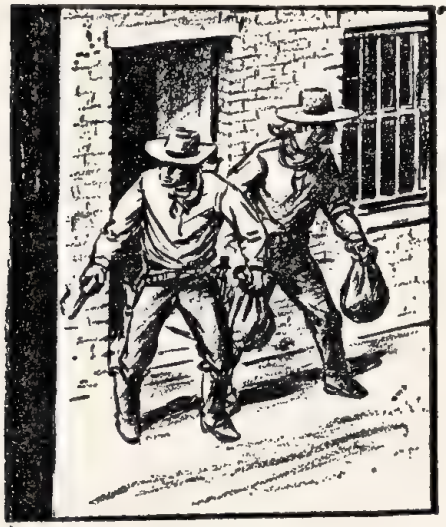
The soldier blinked. "But they said he's hauling hides and blankets and such-like."

"He's hauling ore from the mine I found in Icehouse Canyon. It's in Indian territory and not open to mining. Sergeant Hicks killed the scout because he'd discovered it. I figure Shepley bought the sergeant the night we were here."

Moriarity pondered it. "Then you think the Injun trouble was rigged up?"

"I think Shepley sicced a few bronco Apaches on me the other day to scare us off. In about five minutes we'll know."

Moriarity did not look too certain. In his dogged mind lingered a barb of resentment.



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10 STORY WESTERN 15c MAGAZINE

But if any convincing remained to be done, Thatcher decided, it would have to be done in action. He rode back to the head of the small column.

The hills here were low and rough, dotted with brush. It was good stalking country. Thatcher took a steep hillside and gained a rocky bump. A half-mile ahead, the dust of Shepley's wagon-train hung in the winding pass. Through a notch, he saw a span of laboring horses move by.

He rode faster now, picking his spot and riding for it. He kept behind the higher hills until they struck the arroyo he had spotted. Down the dry wash they rode at a lope. They reached a point a hundred feet from the mouth of it. Thatcher reined in. On the hot, dry air vibrated the tinkling of harness bells. He took the men ahead. Behind a screen of brush, they waited.

The wagons started by. Four of them passed. Jim Shepley came last. On the last wagon, seated on the tarp, sat Sergeant Hicks. He was mopping his face with his neckerchief.

"By God," he was saying, "I ain't sweated so much since we crossed the Jornado! It's a plain sweat-box under that tarp!"

Shepley muttered, "It's going to be hotter if anybody spots you. I'm a-warnin' you."

Hicks ignored it. "I'm going to like seevilian life, Shep. Eighteen years in the Army and what do I get? Eighteen dollars a month! You ain't forgetting," he reminded the other, "I'm to get a cut o' this?"

It was the proper moment for six blue-clad horsemen to swing casually from the mouth of the canyon. They split up, each man moving in to cover a wagon, Moriarity and the lieutenant taking the last one. Shepley's brain was not sluggish. His gun was suddenly in his hand. Thatcher's finger was already tight on the trigger when he realized the contractor was covering Sergeant Hicks.

"Yes, sir!" Shepley said loudly. "We got your man, Lieutenant! Where do you think he was? Under the tarp! Must've crawled in last night, where we laid over. The heat smoked him out."

Hicks' face wore a stricken look. Then it congested. "You carrion-eatin' son of— You can put me in irons, Lieutenant, but so help me . . ."

Shepley's gun leveled. Down the line of wagons, teamsters were turning startled faces. Thatcher said quickly, "I'm putting you both in irons. It's the end of the line, Shepley."

SHEPLEY saw that. He saw, too, that he had nothing to lose by fighting. He spurred his horse; as the animal bucked he slipped from the saddle, sprawled in the dirt and rolled under the wagon. At the head of the caravan a carbine cracked, a teamster went to his knees and fell woodenly under the wheels of his wagon. Other wagons broke out of line as their drivers ducked and began to fire.

Big Jim Shepley's Colt roared. The shot slapped by Ross Thatcher. Then he heard Moriarity's saddle gun crash. Shepley hunched against the ground and slowly relaxed. Sergeant Hicks and the driver of the wagon were both standing, guns lining down on the lieutenant. Thatcher swung his horse; in the same instant, he fired.

The bullet took the sergeant in the left arm. It dangled as he went to his knees. Thatcher heard the skinner's revolver bark. The bullet tore through the low swell of the saddle and struck him in the thigh. Pain was a swirling blackness before his eyes. He tried to fire again at the sergeant. He heard the gun roar but he didn't feel the recoil. As he started to fall he was aware of Private Moriarity spurring in to catch him. . . .

It was hot when he awoke, though he lay in the shade of a wagon. Moriarity was sitting beside him. He held a canteen to Thatcher's lips. The lieutenant drank and the giddiness in his head retreated. He sat up and shook his head.

Moriarity said with concern, "Easy, now, Lieutenant. The ball went right through the muscle, but you got to be careful. I've got you plugged up and I reckon you're going to be all right."

"Did any of the men—"

"Tully got himself an ear shot off. Otherwise we're a hundred percent. The young lady from the store was out here a minute ago," he said casually. "She's gone back for a wagon."

"Maybe I'll surprise her," Thatcher said. "I'm going to ride in." Moriarity objected, but the lieutenant grinned. "You can't kill a greenhorn, Moriarity. Get my horse, Moriarity."

"Only you ain't a greenhorn," the trooper contended. "For a man with his first command, you've made out right well." The soldier grinned.

Thatcher rode back toward the store. He felt better than he had in days. First command . . . It was just a shadow you fought with. It had no more reality than you gave it. When you stopped fighting it, it disappeared.

He decided he must have a long talk with Trader Benton about army wives. Seemed to him the old man had the subject figured out just about right. This time, he didn't think Jean would have any objection to the way he took his cues.

THE END

COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

BY FOWLER AND CASE

BILL (WILLIAM P.) RAYNER, whose sartorial pretentiousness had earned him the soubriquet of "the best-dressed man in Texas," unquestionably looked the part one fine Spring day in 1884 when he pushed through the batwings of Taylor & Look's Gem Saloon in hell-roaring El Paso. He was dashingly turned out in a black sombrero, black Prince Albert and sharply creased gray broadcloth trousers pulled down over highly-polished black boots. His left hand held a pair of dove-gray gloves; his right hung close to the skirt of his unbuttoned coat, which flared at either hip over a pair of matched ivory-butted Colts. Rayner had come to the Gem to "get" Wyatt Earp, who, according to erroneous reports, had arrived in El Paso to take over the job of marshal. But something in Wyatt Earp's cold-nerved manner stayed Rayner's hand; he looked around for another victim—and initiated one of the most unique gun frays in the history of the Southwest.

RAYNER strode past Earp into Rickabaugh's gambling room behind the Gem and began slapping faces with the dove-gray gloves. Bob Cahill was dealing for a game at which Cowboy Bob Rennick was a player. Rayner reached Rennick and began yanking the brim of his Stetson up and down. Rennick snapped, "Stop bothering me," and Rayner replied, "I'm going to the bar for a drink. When I come back, throw me out."

AS RAYNER TURNED HIS BACK, Rennick leaned across the faro layout, grabbed a sixgun from the dealer's drawer and jumped from his chair. Hearing the commotion behind him, Rayner whirled around from the swinging doors, an ivory-butted Colt .45 in each hand. The gun in his right hand vomited lead and four slugs splintered the chair Rennick had just vacated. By the time Rayner had discovered—too late—that the chair was no longer occupied, Rennick fired twice, coolly and deliberately. The first bullet struck Rayner in the chest; the second tore into his abdomen. The smooth, ivory-handled guns dropped from Rayner's limp fingers as he staggerel out to the street. There he collapsed and was taken home to die.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, Buck (Charles N.) Linn, a crony of Rayner's, was out on the streets of El Paso gun-hunting for Bob Cahill, the faro dealer who, according to the first wild rumors reaching him, had been the killer of his friend. As Linn came in, shooting, Cahill waited for his third shot, when Rayner's friend was only ten feet away. Cahill's first bullet tore through Linn's belly; the second struck him squarely in the heart. "The victims had no one to blame but themselves," piously editorialized the El Paso *Herald*. "Their train of life collided with loaded revolvers and they have gone down forever in the smashup."

Jeb Conners said, "The quality folks have never been able to help a man who didn't have what they've got, and now they're scared. They're running, Mary, like a bunch of scared rabbits. They're dragging them pretty dresses in the mud and losing their pretty slippers in the wagon ruts. It does me good to see 'em run, Mary. *I'm glad the damned Yanks are coming!"*

Hank Stronheim stood there, the coil of rope in his hand. . . .

THE FIGHTING SON OF BLACK JEB CONNERS

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THE FIGHTING SON OF BLACK JEB CONNERS

An
Old West Novel

By Thomas Thompson

CHAPTER ONE

The Man the Rebs Forgot

THE news of Bragg's retreat from Chattanooga came with the rain that hammered against the sagging shutters of the cabin and hissed down the broad stone chimney. The panic of it was in the red mud of the highroad, churned thin by the wheels of fleeing landowners—fleeing south, always south, as if this in itself would save their cause.

All day and half the night Jeb Conners had watched them go; arrogant people, their wagons and carts carrying the pieces of nothing that were part of them. Jeb Conners hated them, these fleeing rebels with the proud tilt to their rain-streaked faces. He hated them for the way they avoided his eyes and made excuses, then hurried on into the storm-ripped night.

The rain beat the last lingering leaves from the trees and ran streaming from the hanging moss like sweat from a tired man's beard. The wind, gasping and sobbing as if conscious of the terror of the night, plucked at the loose shakes on the old cabin and set up a rattling there. It came unbidden through the gaping cracks and fought with the freshly molded candles that sputtered their protest on the crude pine table. The wind, like the fleeing landowners, sent pangs of rebellion through the towering frame of Jeb Conners.

He stood there alone, his square-jawed, beard-matted face reflected in a misshapen blur in the rain-streaked window. Twice now he had been out to the lean-to shed for wood, and his long black hair was glistening with rain, matted in dank curls against his head. His black eyes were set in the blue-rimmed sockets

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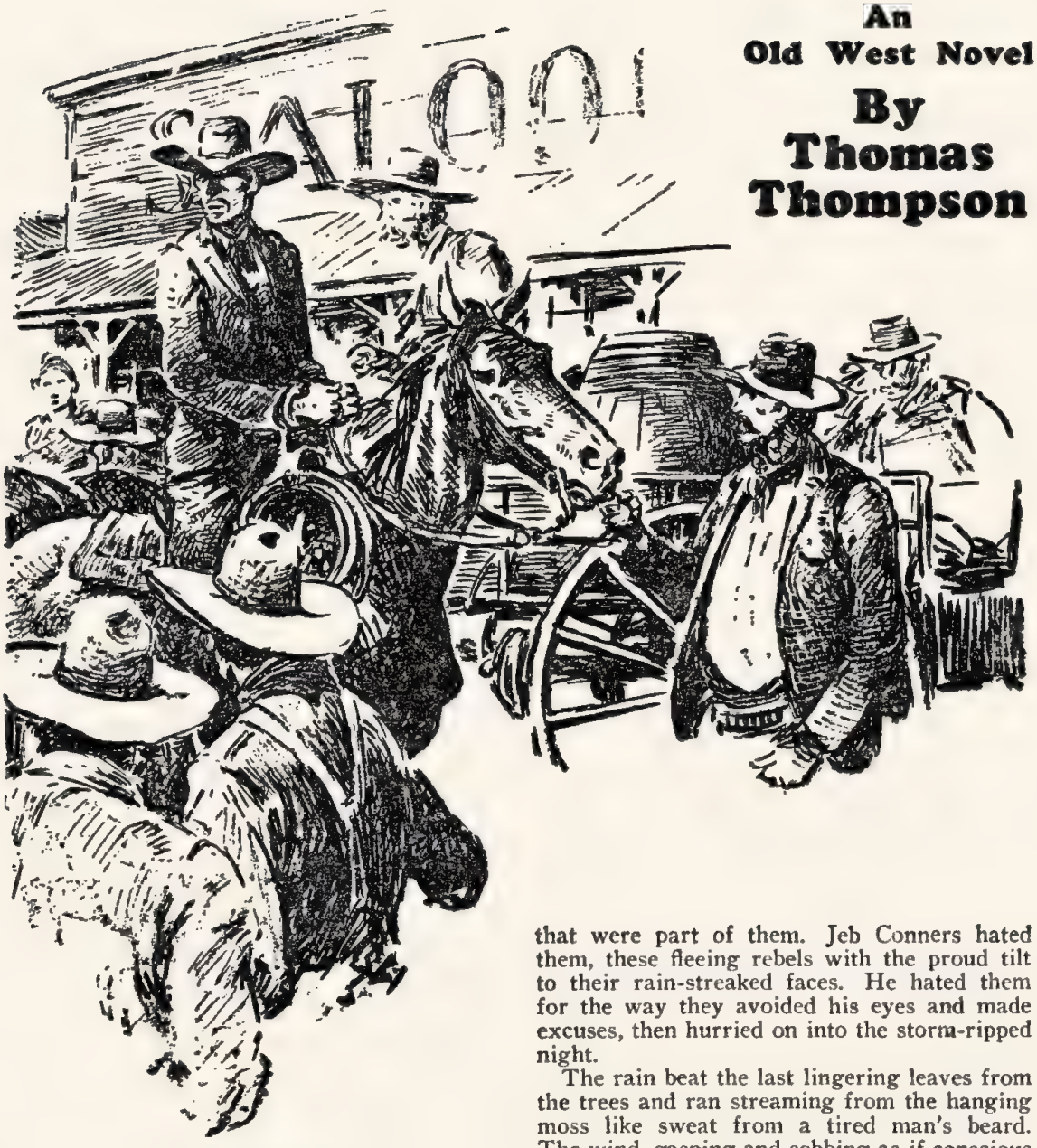

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of a man who has not known sleep in many hours; the pale gray of his gaunt cheeks faded naturally into the deeper ash of his bloodless lips. At times he stood silently, cracking the knuckles of one great hand into the palm of the other. At times he paced back and forth across the cabin, the warped boards creaking under his weight. At last he pushed aside the curtain that screened the bedroom. The woman on the bed looked up at him and tried to smile.

She was younger than Jeb by ten years, and even now in pain and terror there was a calm beauty about her. Her long hair, loose on the white of the pillow, was a startling gold in sharp contrast to her husband's heavy black mane. Her eyes were blue, soft and tired like the eyes of a woman who has followed a man from one horizon to the next. There were tiny bloodstains on her lips where she had bitten them against the pain that wracked her body. Her voice, when she spoke, though only ly a whisper, had a fullness about it. The kind of voice that would make a man be tender. There was no condemnation there when she said, "There's no room for me."

He tried to keep his voice calm, but the surging fear and hate within him came to the surface. The very massiveness of him found its way into his words and shook the thin walls of the cabin. "They got no time for a man," he said bitterly. "They've set with their fine horses and their pretty gowns, so damn smug with their own importance—"

She interrupted him. "You can't blame them, Jeb. They've got their own problems. They don't know us, Jeb. You can't trust anybody now."

He said, "They've never been able to help a man who didn't have what they've got, and now they're scared. They're running, Mary, like a bunch of scared rabbits. They're dragging them damn pretty dresses in the mud and losing their pretty slippers in the wagon ruts. It does me good to see 'em run, Mary. *I'm glad the damned Yanks are coming!*"

"You mustn't, Jeb." A sudden fit of pain stiffened her body, then bowed it beneath the covers. She grasped the quilt with her white hands and turned terror-stricken eyes on her husband. He dropped to his knees beside the bed, all tenderness now, and he covered her face with kisses. She said, "I'll need help, Jeb. Please!"

In spite of his size he seemed small and lost now as he ran from the room, pausing only long enough to stuff another stick in the stove and to lift the lid from the kettle of hot water. It was beginning to simmer, faint bubbles that clung to the side of the pot, then broke away and hurried to the surface. There were deep gasping sobs in the man's throat.

He threw open the door and ran out into the night, out into the deep churned mud of the roadway. The wind came freshly and beat the rain against his face. It soaked his skin and stained dark the thick woollen shirt he wore. It drenched through his trousers and seeped into his heavy boots. He ran crazily, the soft mud sloshing beneath his feet, spurting as high as his head. Then he stopped, gasping for breath, as he called down-wind his cry for help.

A LULL came in the storm. Someplace down the road there he could hear the slogging wheels of a wagon. He had seen it pass not a half hour ago, had pleaded with the tight-lipped family. "Someone else will be along behind us," the man had said. "Doctor Lynch is coming behind us." They had hurried on, the lie going with them. He called again, his great voice pushing aside the rain, rattling through the half nude trees. He knew they must have heard him. The wagon did not come back.

He ran back then, into the wind, and it pulled at him, snatched the breath out of his lungs. The small light from the window of his cabin came in a wavering beam through the rain, mocking him, adding to his panic. Someplace up the road there were the blue-coated avengers, pushing relentlessly into the night, sweeping everything before them. Twice today he had heard the distant rumble of their cannon, coming sodden and ominous through the rain. He caught himself praying they would be here soon, praying they would devastate the country he called home. There'd be a surgeon with the army.

She was crying when he got back to the cabin. He ran to her, but she sent him away and he stood in front of the stove, staring at the floor. The water from his clothes ran first in a stream, then dripped, dimpling the dark pool it had formed on the boards. Twice he turned and went toward the hanging curtain that separated him from his wife, but both times he stopped and came back to stare sightlessly at the floor. Once he heard a sob. Then silence. And at last he could stand the silence no longer and he ran to the curtain, ripping it from its hangings in his haste. She was quiet.

At first he didn't see the thing that was by her. He took her face in both his hands and kissed her, crying unashamed, then the baby twisted its head and worked its mouth. He got to his feet suddenly, shock running through him, shaking him visibly like a chill shakes a man who has come from a too warm room into an ice-toothed wind. Then he started to laugh. A chuckle at first, deep in his throat, then a good clean laugh. He picked up his son, fumbling, not knowing for sure what to do with the naked thing he held. Some age-old instinct told him, as he held the child

by the feet, head down, and he heard the quick lusty bawl. Then he ran with it to the front room where the heat of the stove was fresh. After a while he returned and placed the boy, clumsily wrapped in the blankets she had set aside, close to its mother.

For a while he stood there, grinning down at them, his son, eyes squeezed tightly shut, his hands moving slightly. His wife, strangely still. He spoke to her then and his voice was soft for a man so large.

"It's all right, Mary," he said. "It's all right now. There'll be a wagon along soon that will have room. And even if there ain't the Yankee troops will come. Even the Yankees won't harm a woman and a baby, Mary. You can depend on that. . . .

The things that were in his heart now were too big for words. The tears came into his eyes and blurred his vision. He could see the wealth of blonde hair on the pillow and the softness of her face. He knelt down beside the bed and pressed his lips to hers. Then slowly he stood up, the color gone from his cheeks. His eyes, pit black, were wider now, like the eyes of a wild animal caught in a snare. He spoke her name once, softly, then he screamed it. The baby cried. After a long time he pulled the blanket up to cover her face and he took the baby back into the front room.

He sat down in the rocker by the stove. It was a new rocker; one he had built himself from the limbs of the hickory, scraping the bark off in spots to give it a finished look. The rockers he had cut with a draw knife from a slab of yellow pine. They had talked a lot about that rocker, he and Mary, how they would rock the babe. He sat there now, holding his son, a smile on his face as he rocked back and forth, humming under his breath. Outside the wind and the rain rattled against the cabin and the bare limbs of the trees beckoned and pointed as if trying to make him see what had happened. And after a long time it came to him that his wife was dead.

He got up then suddenly and screamed his curses. The baby cried and he shook it viciously. A wild desire to dash it against the wall possessed him but some inner voice, some long-forgotten thing, held him back. It kept surging through his brain, holding him, and he laughed crazily. He held the baby out at arm's length, the full fury of him passing through his arms into the ill-wrapped bundle. "You killed her," he said then, "my son."

Then he was calm. He hurried around the cabin, picking up a rifle and an old slicker. Tenderly he wrapped the child in the slicker, a wild light in his eyes. His brain was working now, working with a cool hatred for everything that moved. Those fleeing wagons, this squirming thing in the slicker. There was only one thing he did not hate, and she was dead.

Bare-headed and coatless he went out into the night, leaving the door open behind him. The wind came gleefully into the room and snuffed the candles. Walking slowly, slogging through the knee-deep mud, Jeb Conners walked up the road. Up the road toward the approaching Union troops, Up the road to meet the rain-drenched dawn with its cloud-curtained half dead moon.

CHAPTER TWO

Son of Black Jeb Connors

BUT the war was not over. It screamed its minnie ball and grapeshot hell through nearly two more years of blood. Now, eighteen years later, it was all but forgotten by the men of Oklahoma in their mad scramble for wealth and power or a piece of land. Johnny Reb and Johnny Yank fought side by side to haze their longhorn charges from the thickets of Texas to the belching railroads farther north, and side by side they dipped into the rotten graft that the ribbons of steel and Government contracts offered. It was an era of infamy such as the country had never known, and many rode to the top on the unscrupulous crest.

But it was starting to change now; slowly, gradually, an unseen rolling surge, backed by the indignant determination of a people. President Hayes, in constant conflict with his Congress, had nevertheless brought before the people the need of an end to the spoils system —the pork-barrel politics that had ground the South under an iron heel, given untold acres to the railroads and expended thousands for projects that existed only in the warped brain of some promoter.

Tonight, here in the wide sea of grass that was Oklahoma, men talked of the new President of the United States, James A. Garfield. For a moment lean wind-burned men forgot their battle against the insurgence of cattle and the flaunting of homestead laws. Perhaps it would change. And it was fitting that on this night their most hated enemy of the old era should die.

Black Jeb Conners, they called the one who had died, and the settlers who had come here to claim their quarter-sections took heart at his passing. A fabulous man, this black-haired giant, a product of the times. He was not a man to know but a man to hate, and the tales that were told of him were whispered tales that had come through the mud of war and the vagrant winds of gossip. A heartless, soulless man, they said. A man without a country and without a God, but a man whose holdings no one dared molest.

He'd died on a cold bleak night when the wind was in the north and the smoke streamers

clung to the ground, and the three men who were with him saw his passing with varying emotions, but none of them were sorry. Doc Plummer, the medic from Camp Supply, saw in it a reaffirmation of his contention that no man was big enough to cheat death. Vance Jacoby, the Yankee cattle buyer, saw in it a chance to go on to bigger spoils. Chat Conners, the dead man's son, saw in it a chance to become a man.

In town the grangers, their faces rubbed raw by the wind, told one another that it was a symbol, this coming of Garfield and the passing of Jeb Conners. The soft-shoed, goody-goody policies of "Granny" Hayes had failed to stop the manipulation of railroad lands and the grafting of Indian Agents, and the desultory cutting of fences by the grangers had failed to stop the guns of Jeb Conners' lawless crew.

Out in the bunkhouse on the Conners ranch that same gun-hung crew waited now to see which side would offer the best pay for lead, and as the hanging lantern spilled its yellow circle across the greasy cards, one Tim Arnold spoke and said that Vance Jacoby was the man to side.

On the prairie in the too silent night the wind tumbled black clouds across the horizon as if to match the clouds of rebellion that gathered now on the treeless plain. But one man saw in the turn of affairs an opportunity to continue the old way, and that man was Vance Jacoby.

Jacoby had shown up in Texas after the war, a short-coupled hard-fisted man with a quick brain and a fast gun. He'd been a captain in the Union army, it was said, but he had been on "vacation" leave most of the time. He was now a man of forty, with the snap steel spring of youth in his muscles.

Carpet-bagging had given him his first taste of wealth and power. Later he had dealt in hides and tallow down on the Gulf, and when a market was found for the herds in the north he rode that way and forced his way into the lucrative commission field. Now he was with one of the biggest packers in Chicago, and men said it was a good cover-up for his more secret activities. He was roundly hated by nester and cattleman alike, but he had money for the latter and a little extra if a man had few enough scrupples.

IN SOME ways, Vance Jacoby and Black Jeb Conners had been alike in that they cared little what men said, just so they made money. Black Jeb had grown in stature, smashing everything before him, including his son, who was a perfect image of the man. Vance Jacoby, though twenty years younger than Black Jeb, had grown in the same way, but his path had been different.

Where Black Jeb had done things with his hands, Vance Jacoby had done things with his brain. While Black Jeb slashed his leggins and tore the skin from his body chousing his first unmarked brockled longhorn from the brasada, Vance Jacoby sat in plush offices and talked to the men who counted in this day of political favors. He came to know a couple of senators well enough that he could draw pay for more Indian beef than he delivered, and he had a good hold on local politics. He bowed and curried favor with men who were strong, but always he dreamed of owning them. He had never been able to own Black Jeb Conners.

With the coming of the Glidden barbed wire, a storm of protest arose from the free graze cattlemen, and the influx of nesters saw in it a Godsend. But here again Black Jeb Conners turned defeat into victory, for he bought more wire than any other man and he fenced his holdings, made up of leased land and land he had bought with purchased script. And in time he fenced any land that took his fancy, even if it meant fencing around some nester who had already made his claim. And with Vance Jacoby as an outlet Black Jeb prospered and a share of the tainted money found its way into the pockets of the cattle buyer as well. But Vance Jacoby never forgot his dream of owning it all. Now that chance had come. There was only one person in his way. Chat Conners, the dead man's son, and he didn't count.

Under different circumstances perhaps Chat would have been a man to reckon with; it was hard to say. In build he was a man, for he was well over six feet, broad across the shoulders, slim-hipped and long-legged. He could ride like a Comanche and in Texas he had learned to bust a thicket that a jack-rabbit couldn't touch. The handling of a rifle had come natural to him.

Women, if he had known any, would have sighed over his looks. Men frankly admitted he was handsome. His face had the same ruggedness that was in his dad's features, but somehow there was more of a softness in Chat's. His hair was the same unruly jet black close-clinging curl. But his eyes held the startling difference. Blue, large, raftered by heavy jet black brows and screened by unusually long black lashes, they were the kind of eyes a woman would want. Those eyes gave the boy almost a girlish appearance.

His full name was Chattanooga, and once when he had asked his father how it happened that he had chosen a name like that, Black Jeb stared hard at his son for a second, wrath deep in his eyes. "Because that's a place I hate," he said.

And he had grown stubbornly to manhood that way, hated by his father, jeered at by the

gunslick crew, shunned by the nesters who plotted the downfall of Black Jeb. Only Vance Jacoby had shown him any consideration, for Jacoby had seen in the boy a chance to come into possession of the thing he wanted most in the world—the Conners holdings.

But as death grayed the cheeks of Black Jeb Conners, Chat felt a change coming over himself. He was no longer under the whiplash of dictatorship now; he was free. He alone owned the Conners holdings, and it was he alone who could decide what to do about it. The sudden surge of freedom made him almost child-like in his decisions.

The first move was to dispose of the land. That which he legally owned he would sell at a fair price. If a survey proved, as everyone said, that public land had been fenced, those fences would come down. If a nester's claim had been swallowed up by the indiscriminate spreading of the Conners monopoly, those nesters would be reimbursed. There was a flush of excitement in the kid's face as he went into the huge front room to meet Jacoby. Chat Conners could not have said so, but this was no crusading on his part. It was nothing more than a burning sub-conscious hunger for friendship. By doing these things he could make friends of the nesters who now spoke of him only with hollow-eyed hatred.

JACOBY was sitting in a deep chair, a fat cigar between his lips, a half-empty bottle on a low table in front of him. He had a way of holding his fingertips together and sighting over the tops of them when he spoke seriously to a man. He did that now.

"I've watched you a long time, kid," Jacoby said. "It hasn't been easy for you. It'll be good for you to get away."

"Yeah," Chat Conners said. He had come to be curt, almost surly, in his long exile, and above all he had come to trust no one connected with his father. Although he had never been included in any plans made by the two men, he knew of their dealings, for a blind man could have added the facts. He knew now that he would have to be careful in what he said to Vance Jacoby if he were to stay free of the man. Jacoby seemed to sense this hedging.

"I imagine you'll want to be clearing out as soon as possible," Jacoby said.

"That's right."

The cattle buyer found some reassurance in this. He exhaled loudly, the thin blue smoke swirling upward against the heat of the fireplace. "In that case," he said, relaxing, "I'll have the papers drawn up in the morning. Drink to it?"

Here again was that dictatorship, that complete refusal to accept Chat Conners as a man with a mind. Chat knew well enough that Jacoby would set his own terms, confident that Chat would take anything, just so he got clear of this spawning ground of hatred. By selling to Jacoby he was tying himself forever to the abnormal, the taint of blood and gunsmoke. He said, "I want to handle it different than we talked about, Vance."

Vance Jacoby was not a man to lose his composure. Neither was he a man to change his mind. He poured himself a stiff drink and relit his cigar. He had known Black Jeb a long time and he seemed to sense a sameness in this son who stood here now. He spoke quietly, squinting up through the match flame. "I guess I didn't hear you right," he said cautiously.

"I'll put it this way then," Chat Conners said. "I'm not selling it to you." It was the first time in his life he had even been able to take a stand on anything, and the feeling it gave him was distorted, a sense of power out of proportion to his abilities. The childhood that had been denied him had left a touch of the little boy in him. It showed on his face, and Vance Jacoby caught it. He laughed amiably.

"Want to carry on in your dady's footsteps, eh?" he said. "It's a tough road, Chat."

"I'm going to sell off the land in sections and trail my cattle north," Chat Conners said.

Vance Jacoby did not answer for a long time. Sitting there, idly tapping the ash from his cigar, Chat could almost read the man's thoughts. He was wondering if he should make something of this now or take the longer way around. In either case he felt he had nothing to worry about. He got up slowly, stretched, then turned his back to the fire, hands laced behind him. He said, "I've planned on having this place, Chat. You knew that. I don't like your decision."

"Is that a threat?" Chat wanted to know.

"Of course not, boy," Vance Jacoby said. "I only threaten people who might give me trouble. You wouldn't do that."

He had laughed when he said that, but it was a laugh that sent a prickle of doubt up the spine of Chat Conners. Now Chat stood by the big side window and watched Vance Jacoby go to the bunkhouse. A half hour later Jacoby came out and his rig rattled off into the night in the direction of town.

CHAPTER THREE

Partner for an Exiled King

THE crew quit the next morning. Bearded, surly men, as ruthless and uncompromising as the man who had hired them, they stomped into the office without ceremony and demanded their pay. In the arrogance of Tim Arnold,

their leader, Chat Conners saw the instructions of Vance Jacoby taking shape. Chat knew that this was a gentle hint from Jacoby to think twice. The next warning would take a different form.

At first Chat tried to reason with them. During the night he had thought over his plans. That first flush had passed out of him and his thinking had matured. It took the same line—eventual disposal of the ranch—but he was taking a more canny attitude now. It would take time. There was land to sell and cattle to drive north. To one of the Sioux reservations, maybe. With the money, he could locate in Montana or Wyoming. Even Oregon. He held the prospect of a round-up and a trail drive up to these men, offering them extra pay. They laughed in his face.

It was Tim Arnold who did most of the talking, using words put in his mouth by Vance Jacoby. Arnold was a man nearly as tall as Chat. He had a square face, always covered with a stubble of red beard. He had a vile disposition, but he had an ability to get more work out of a crew than any man Chat knew except Black Jeb himself. He feared one man, and that man had been his boss. Now that Jeb was gone Tim Arnold, like Chat, was doing things the way he wanted. He was playing for big stakes, and to him Vance Jacoby seemed to hold the winning hand. He stepped forward quickly and grasped the young ranch owner by the collar.

"I put up with a crazy man for five years, kid," Arnold said, his face thrust close to Chat's. "We've had enough of it now, me and these men. We ain't takin' no orders from a yellow-bellied maverick that can't name his own ma!"

Something exploded inside Chat Conners then. One second he was standing there, a half scared kid, his arms dangling loose at his sides. The next second his fist had come up and lashed across the desk with the full power of his weight behind it. It caught Tim Arnold in the mouth and sent him crashing back into the arms of his men.

Tim hung there, blood seeping from his cut lips. At first his stubbled face had drained of color, now it flushed slowly, making the huge freckles stand out against his skin. His sleeves were half rolled, exposing the underwear that came to his wrists. The muscles in his forearms bunched as he lunged out, snatched up a chair and hurled it across the room. Chat dodged and the chair splintered against the desk.

The men were yelling for blood now, calling encouragement to Tim Arnold. They shoved Tim across the room, back into the fight. He turned on them with a snarl, threatening them with his open hand, then whirled to face Chat Conners. He was met by the ugly snout of a .44, leveled across the desk. Chat's cool voice warned him back.

"You better get off my range and stay off," the kid said. "And you can tell Vance Jacoby I won't scare as easy as he thought."

Somehow, the saying of it made him a man. He could feel it surging around inside him. He was calm as he watched them go, surly and muttering threats, and after they were gone he smiled to himself as he dropped the six-shooter back into the desk drawer where he had found it.

But when he sat down a weak feeling crawled into the pit of his stomach. When he tried to roll a cigarette he found that his hands were shaking. He went into the kitchen and made himself a pot of coffee, then went out to the corral and caught up a rangy sorrel. The quiet of the house was beginning to get under his skin.

There was no place to go, but as he rode out through the gate onto the undulating prairie he felt better. Here was space for a man to breathe in, free of the oppressive hatred that seemed to hover over the Conners ranch buildings. He let his horse out into a long lope and with the wind beating in his face he began to feel proud of the thing he had done. This was fertile land, good land for the plow. There'd been enough of exploiting by men like Black Jeb and Vance Jacoby.

The row of willows whose wind-turned leaves made a silver-lined slash across the bottoms drew him, and he turned that way, coming at last to the three-strand fence that stood like a fortress between the Conners property and the cross-hatched fields of the grangers across the creek. There had been blood spilled over that fence, Chat knew. He rode along it and watched its marching row of posts dwindle away over the crown of the horizon. He saw two riders, sharp against the cloud-filtered sunlight, coming up the opposite side of the fence.

He knew who they were without asking, for they fit perfectly the description he had heard Tim Arnold and his father use to describe the Stronheim brothers. The one on the left there, packing the rifle, would be Hank; the shorter one, Emmett. Chat slowed his horse to a walk, eyeing the two men carefully.

They were as alike as twins, these two nesters. Heavy set and blond, perfect Teutonic types, they were men well capable of leading the opposition to Black Jeb Conners and his land-grab crew. They had come three years ago, and since their coming there had been a steady move toward open warfare. Along with crippled old Ben Winford and his daughter they formed the real backbone of the granger party. They were nearly abreast of Chat now, and they reined up and waited. Chat waved a greeting with his right hand. The salutation

was not returned, but Hank leaned forward in his saddle, the rifle across the pommel. He was a good looking man, not much older than Chat. He bit off his words when he spoke.

"You're young Conners, ain't you?"

Chat took his time about answering, sizing up the two men across the fence. Finally he nodded agreement to Hank's question.

"We come to tell you to move out," Hank Stronheim said.

Chat had planned to talk to these men and tell them he wanted to sell his land, but they weren't going to give him the chance. He felt a sudden rebellion surge up within him and he began to wonder if perhaps this wasn't the way his father had felt. A proud man could be driven into land-grabbing just to protect his pride.

Chat said, "Why didn't you tell my father?"

Hank Stronheim flushed to the roots of his blond hair. "We'd a told him all right if the devil hadn't a got him first," he said. "We're fed up with your land-hoggin' and cabin-burnin'. We're givin' you notice to move out. It's the only way."

"And if I don't?" Chat asked.

"We'll be over to move you," Hank said. The two brothers wheeled their horses and loped back across the buffalo wallow swales toward the cluster of shacks that stood alone on the vast carpet of grass. Chat watched them go, then he continued his ride, glancing back from time to time down the fence toward where the road to town cut in by the creek crossing.

ANY rose-tinted picture he had held was gone now. The blood of his father was in his veins in spite of himself, and he rebelled at being driven by either Vance Jacoby or the nesters. He'd sell, for that was what he planned to do, and he'd leave Oklahoma, for that was the only way to start a new life. But at the same time he'd not leave having people say he was forced to go. He began to wish he had brought a gun with him. There was a dull meaness beginning to boil in his veins.

The sun had dropped in a cloud bank and its gold streamers speared up and failed to pierce the tumbling mass of black that billowed like smoke piles above the waves of grass. The wind was not a wind, but a hushed moistness that flared and died. A longhorn made a break-neck run through the willow thicket along the creek and the crashing of the brush was loud in the stillness. Connors came to the creek crossing and got down and opened the barbed wire gate. He was closing it again when he heard the sound of a horse behind him and the hair prickled along the nape of his neck. He half turned and saw her, riding out to meet the road.

He knew it was Julia Winford, for there would be no other woman around here close, and yet the sight of her startled him and held him tongue-tied. He had never given it much thought, but somehow in the back of his mind he had pictured the daughter of the fire-eating Ben Winford as an older woman; thirty or forty, perhaps. The girl on the horse was at least a year younger than himself, he judged, and silhouetted against the cloud-hung afternoon sky she was beautiful.

For a long time they remained still, a dozen yards apart, watching each other. She wore a divided skirt and rode astride, like a man. Her hair, caught back from her face by a ribbon, was a coppery hue, and as she sat there the wind caught a whisp of it and carried it across her cheek. She reached up with a gloved hand and pushed it aside. There was a natural unspoiled grace in the movement and it broke the spell of the moment. She smiled and gave him an easy "Hello."

There was a deep throatiness in her voice that sent a queer chill through Chat's body, and when he answered her he did not recognize his own voice. It seemed to assure her, and she rode closer, stopping her horse near his, head into the wind. "It's late for you to be riding," he said awkwardly.

"It is late," she said. She seemed anxious to talk now. "I stopped by Mrs. Saddlers to visit a minute. She's got a new baby, you know. I always lose track of time. Dad will be worried sick, I'm afraid. I have to get to town." She stopped suddenly, a flush creeping into her cheeks as she noticed his intent gaze. She started to speak but could not seem to find words. Then she said, "You folks must have come in lately. I'm Julia Winford."

"I know," he said. He couldn't take his eyes away from her face. Her lips, half parted, showed the tips of even white teeth. Her coat was unbuttoned and her shirt, open at the throat, exposed the white skin of her neck. Her hand went up to close the shirt and Chat felt the blood rush into his cheeks.

He said, "I'm not a new farmer. I'm Chat Conners."

For a second he thought she was going to quirt her horse. He saw her hand lift, her fingers tighten on the reins. It sent a surge of bitterness through him that burst out in words. "Does that make such a difference?" he asked.

She watched him closely, as if still undecided as to what she should do. Then she relaxed and smiled nervously. "No," she said, "I suppose not. Only—"

"Only what?" he demanded.

"Well," she said, her voice faltering, "your father and my father—"

"My father's dead!" he snapped.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry for you."

"You needn't be," he said.

That wall of silence came up between them again and clouds bunched against the

horizon and fanned out across the sky, engulfing the trembling sun fan that still tried to cling to the murky day. She glanced at the sky and toyed nervously with her quirt. "I have to go," she said. He saw her press the reins against her pony's neck. And suddenly he didn't want her to leave. If she left he would be alone again. He tugged the reins and led his horse close to her. There was sudden fright in her wide green eyes.

"Look," he said, his words tumbling out. "I know what you think of my father and maybe what you think of me. But you're wrong, see? I want to change all that. I want to get along with people."

It wasn't what he wanted to tell her and he knew that there was no use trying to make a pretty speech. His voice was pleading when he said, "Let me ride along with you, will you? I want to tell you about it. I don't want to go back to the ranch." That half fear was still in her eyes. He wanted it to go away. He said, "Can't you see I'm just lonesome?"

He felt silly, now that he had said it, but the fear was leaving her face. She said, "If you were going to town anyway."

"Thanks," he said. He said it almost gleefully and she seemed to hear it in his voice, for she smiled at him and touched her horse's flank with her quirt. Together they hit the wagon road at a smart clip, their backs to the now dead sun.

CHAPTER FOUR

"That Makes Us Even"

IT WAS nearly dark when Chat Conners and Julia Winford reached town. It was a soft darkness that had come an hour early and the yellow lights of the stores and saloon hung in the still air as if suspended. Once or twice a large stray drop of rain hit the deep dust in a solitary dimple. It had turned bitterly cold.

But the warmth inside Chat Conners dispelled the cut of the air and the dreariness of the evening. Tonight he was one with his fellow men and the world was good. Julia Winford, after that first startled uneasiness, had proven herself an easy person to know, and Chat Conners, glowing under the first normal friendliness from a person his own age he had ever known, had been expansive.

He told her of his plans and the eager light in her eyes as she listened made him know he'd move earth or hell if necessary to do the right thing by these nesters who had been cheated out of their land and whom she called her people. Only when he mentioned the Stronheim brothers did a disquieting note come into the conversation to cloud his exuberance.

It was the way she spoke the name of Hank—easy, off-hand, the way a woman speaks of her husband. "He's a wonderful fellow, really," she said, and the way she said it sent a a current of jealousy through him. He told her he wanted to deal with her father, not the Stronheims, and she laughed.

"You leave Hank to me," she said lightly. "He'll do anything I ask him."

He was still worrying about this when she left him at the edge of town and rode on to the general merchandise store down the street. She had promised to talk to her father and the others. She would try to get them to come to Chat's ranch to talk it out.

She rode close to him before leaving and reached out and touched his hand. A shock, as if she had touched him with a hot iron, ran through his body. "I want you to know I believe in you," she said.

It was all he needed to start his heart singing again, and he rode down the street and tied his horse in front of the Blue Goose. The hostile stares of the few nesters in town did not bother him now. By this time tomorrow they would be his friends. He batted aside the doors of the saloon and saw Vance Jacoby and Tim Arnold standing at the bar. Arnold's lip still bore the mark of Chat's fist.

A sudden silence fell in the room when Chat entered. Lined along the bar was the crew that had left him that morning. They were well into spending their pay now. One man started to giggle like a ten-year-old child. Another cursed softly. Tim Arnold pushed himself away from the bar but Jacoby held him back. Chat tried to grin as if nothing were wrong.

Jacoby made the first move. The cattle buyer waved his cigar in a half friendly greeting and jerked his head toward a bottle. Chat said, "Sure," and walked over to accept his drink. Arnold picked up the bottle that stood on the bar and moved over to a table.

"I don't drink with skunks," he said loudly. Four more men left the bar.

Chat felt quick anger boil up in him, but somehow it was hard to get stirred up tonight. He poured himself a drink out of Jacoby's bottle, turned, hooked his left heel over the rail and dropped his left elbow on the bar. Raising his drink to Tim Arnold, he said, "I don't drink with skunks either, Arnold. You stay at that table and I'll stay at the bar. That way we can both drink." He downed the whiskey and stood there, smiling.

Arnold rose half way out of his chair, his eyes mean. The other men at the table held him. Not a man in the room spoke and the bartender quit wiping the bar. Jacoby's laugh was like a pistol shot in the silence. "Calm down, you two," Jacoby said easily. "Can't you see the boy just dropped in for a friendly drink? Besides, him and me have got business to talk."

"Have we?" Conners said.

"You were all up in the air last night," Jacoby said. "You didn't give me a chance to tell you my offer."

"I'm not interested in your offer, Vance," Chat said.

The cattle buyer put down his glass and carefully knocked the ash off the end of his cigar. He said, "You better be, Chat."

"Why?"

"You can't run a ranch without a crew."

"But if you owned it you could get a crew. That it?"

Jacoby smiled. "They're friends of mine," he said easily. "I've known the boys a long time."

"You said last night you didn't threaten people unless you were scared of them," Chat said.

VANCE JACOBY was still smiling, but it was a cold smile. He said, "That's a good place you got out there, Chat. I could do well with it. You aim to be smart and clean up while you can or do you aim to be a damn fool?"

"I aim to give it back to the people you and my dad stole it from," Chat said flatly. He poured himself a drink and downed it quickly, his eyes never leaving Jacoby's face.

"Tryin' to play God?" Jacoby asked.

"Maybe," Chat answered.

"I don't think it's smart, Chat."

"I do."

They stood there, watching each other like two stray dogs. Jacoby laughed and said, "I'm not buying any more drinks."

Chat said, "I'll pay back the two I owe you." He tossed a fifty cent piece on the bar.

Jacoby smiled as he eyed the coin. "That makes us even Chat," he said.

Chat said, "That makes us even." He turned his back then and walked out on the porch. Behind him he could hear the sudden rise of voices and Arnold's heavy cursing.

Julia Winford's horse was still tied in front of the store. Conners crossed over, his heart beating wildly against his ribs. The hornet's nest behind him was completely forgotten in the sudden urge to see her again. She came out of the store, carrying a sack. He ran forward and took it from her. She smiled.

"Why, Mr. Conners," she said. "I thought you'd be gone."

"You knew I wouldn't," he said. His voice was strangely hoarse. He saw the quick color rise in her throat, the nervousness that twitched the corners of her full lips. She backed out of dangerous ground quickly by turning the conversation back to the land deal.

"I've talked to several of them," she said eagerly. "They'll be over tomorrow afternoon —and there won't be a gun in the crowd!" She laughed when she said that, as if it were a joke, but he knew she was telling him she was trusting him to keep the meeting peaceful. She had taken his side against her people.

Her face was turned up to his, her eyes shining, lips parted. A feeling like hunger swept through him and he took both her hands in his, pulling her close to him. "You're beautiful," he whispered.

She pulled away from him, her face crimson. "Please, Mr. Conners," she said. "You don't understand—" Her words were cut off suddenly and the color left her cheeks as quickly as it had come. A hand reached out and jerked Chat around. Seemingly from nowhere a hammer-like fist smashed Chat's face, sprawling him in the dirt of the street. He shook his head to clear his vision and saw Emmett Stronheim standing over him.

"Maybe that will make him understand," Emmett said.

Julia Winford had thrown herself against Emmett, holding him back. "Don't, Emmett!" she pleaded. "It's all right."

"It ain't all right when a dirty back-shootin' land-grabber starts botherin' my brother's girl," Emmett said. "Get out of my way, Julie. I'll kill that dirty son!"

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

"Emmett! Don't!"

He shoved her aside roughly and brought back his booted foot to plant a kick in Chat's ribs. Chat rolled and staggered to his feet. He was met immediately by a crushing blow that rattled the teeth in his head. He stood there, blood running into his mouth, his eyes glazed. Around him he could see a sudden sea of faces—nesters—some of his old crew....

Half dazed he swung a wild, looping right toward Stronheim's face. The blow met air, and he heard the crowd laugh. Then he felt his face being slapped, first one side, then the other. A million stars exploded as Stronheim's fist connected with the point of his chin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Storm Rider

WHEN HE opened his eyes he was conscious of the stockade of legs around him, but he saw only the worried face of Julia Winford, close to his. He tried to smile through battered lips, tell her it was all right, but he couldn't find the words.

As full consciousness returned he saw Julia get to her feet and go to Emmett Stronheim, who still stood near, fists clenched. Chat got up, dizzy from the beating he had taken. When Emmett started toward him it was Julia who held him back and pleaded with the nesters in the crowd to stop him. One shaggy-haired farmer, reeling a little, came out and clapped an arm affectionately around Emmett's shoulder.

"Come on, Emmett," he said. "You did a good job on him. Let's go have another drink" For a second Stronheim stood glowering at Chat, then he pushed his way through the crowd and crossed over to one of the saloons.

Through the opening he had made Vance Jacoby stepped through, his ever-present cigar held out in front of him. The nesters moved back away from the man as if he were unclean.

"You got friends in town, boy," Jacoby said. "Shall we even this up?"

Chat stood there for a moment, watching the sullen looks in the eyes of the nesters as they saw the familiarity between Chat and the hated Jacoby. Jacoby had come over and put one arm around Chat's shoulder. With his free hand he was brushing the dirt from Chat's clothes. Chat shoved the man aside and said loud enough that he hoped all would hear, "I've got no friends, Jacoby. Least of all you!" He elbowed his way through the fast dispersing crowd and got his horse. He was stepping up into the saddle when he caught the familiar scent of Vance Jacoby's cigar. He withdrew his foot from the stirrup and turned to face the cattle buyer.

"What was the idea, Jacoby?" Chat asked.

"Of what?" Jacoby said innocently, spreading his hands.

"Trying to make those people think you and me were still together."

"Aren't we?"

"We settled up scores there at the bar," Chat said.

"It's a shame to give the place away," Jacoby said in mock concern.

"I'm not giving it away," Chat said. "I'm selling it to people who need it and will do something with it. The cattle I'm taking north with me. Don't worry about me, Jacoby. I'll do all right."

"Maybe the going will get rougher from here on in," Jacoby said.

"Still threatening, eh, Jacoby?"

Vance Jacoby shrugged and flicked a piece of invisible dust from the lapel of his coat. "Just making suggestions," he said.

Chat mounted his horse and rode out of town, leaving Jacoby standing there at the side of the street, his cigar making a red splotch of light against his round face.

The wind had come up now, bringing a taste of ice with it. Chat shivvered against its cuting bite, and the cold brought a dull ache to his swollen jaw. The ache reached down inside of him and he cursed the night and the land around him. Now, more than ever before, he wanted to leave, for as long as he stayed here there would be this conflict, this hatred that had always been so much a part of his life. Tomorrow he'd tell them. Tomorrow the nesters would back down, admit they had been wrong about him. It would be the first step toward rebuilding his life. This line of thought brought him back to Julia, and again he had that surge of jealousy as he remembered how Stronheim had defended her as his brother's girl.

He wondered then where she had gone, and the memory of her trying to protect him sent a sudden glow through his veins. He reasoned with himself as he rode on into the night, holding his arms tight against his body to shield off the biting cold. She was the only girl he had ever known, and he asked himself if this were the reason she affected him so strongly. He tried to tell himself that this was the case, but it turned to a lie in his mouth. He was in love with a girl who was promised to another man.

It was down in the bottoms where the creek cut across the road that the first rain came. It swept in across the prairie in a blinding sheet, soaking him to the skin. Then it lulled and the wind froze his clothes to his body. He spurred his horse on, knowing that he must reach home. The wind beat in his ears and played

tricks with his hearing. He pulled up short, for it was not the voice of the wind he heard now but a cry for help.

He listened, head cocked away from the howl of the wind, and heard it again. Reining his horse, he headed for the shelter of the willows and there he found her, braced against the storm. Her horse was lying on the ground and she had unsaddled it and wrapped the saddle blanket around her. He dismounted quickly and ran to her side.

She was crying. The lifeless horse, one leg twisted, and the small revolver in her hand told the story. He said, "You poor kid," then he led her to his own horse and helped her up behind his saddle. Riding double they headed back into the storm. She said nothing, but the feel of her arms clasped tightly around him, the warmth of her body against his back gave him a savage satisfaction that was in tune with the howling of the night.

HE SPURRED his horse unmercifully, trying to beat the storm, but the wind screamed diabolically at them and drove the drenching rain against them until it ran in streams from their bodies. Then came a lull, and without the mercy of gradual transition the rain turned to pelting hail.

The hail-stones beat against his face, raising welts. The horse shied crazily, trying to dodge the punishment. He opened his coat and wrapped it around her to protect her the best he could, and the hail, as if seeing this puny effort, doubled its fury. Voice muffled by the folds of the coat, she called to him, her cheek pressed close to his back. "There's an old shack over to the right, down near those cottonwoods!" He beat his horse across the neck with the reins, forcing it to turn that way.

The shack, a sagging, dismal thing in the ice-filled night, loomed up before them, its half-gone sod roof absorbing the pounding of the hail. He dismounted quickly, pulling her down into his arms, and with his foot he kicked the door off the rusted hinges and carried her in. Rushing back into the night he led the horse under the scant protection of a lean-to shed and went back inside. Groping in the dark he managed to prop the door back to where it would cut out most of the wind, then he fumbled in his pockets for a match.

After a while he found one that would light, and by its sputtering circle of sulphurous light he surveyed the rude interior of the earthen floored soddy. There were remains of chairs there, made of boxes, and one of these he ripped apart, breaking it into kindling with his hands. After what seemed an eternity of heartbreaking inability to get his sodden matches to light, one caught, and he fanned the feeble flame to life until it licked the dry box wood and flared up.

He could see her standing there then, her coppery hair hanging in wet strands around her white face, her eyes wide with a helpless fear. It angered him, and he set to work ripping up the planks that had once been a table, tearing loose the boards set with pegs into the sod wall—the remnants of a bed. These he threw into the rough fireplace until the blaze leaped up the chimney and some measure of warmth came into the room. Then together they stood there, close to the fire, steam curling from their wet clothing. He could feel the mixed emotions that were tormenting her: the thankfulness of his sheltering her from the night, the fear of being near him. It surged up and exploded within him and burst from his lips in one word. "Why?"

She knew what he meant. She spoke slowly, not to him, but to the room. "This was a home once," she said softly. "There was a man and his wife. A young couple. They'd been married just a month."

He knew now what she was going to say, and the bitterness in him rose up in his throat and choked him. He said, "I told you I wanted to change all that. I can't be responsible for what has gone before. I can only change what happens from here on."

"It won't bring back a man's life," she said softly. "It will take a long time for my people to forget."

The wind quieted and he went outside and unsaddled his horse. The cold bit into his bones after the warmth of the fire, and he hurried back inside, bringing his saddle blanket with him. He gave it to her, for it was dryer than the one she had, and he motioned for her to sit by the earthen hearth. She sat there, her hands locked around her drawn-up knees, the blanket around her shoulders, and the fire struck glints of light from her eyes. After a while he sat down near her.

She said, "It'll be all right. I know it will. They'll like you when they know you. They need to see you the way I've seen you."

He didn't know how it happened. His arms were around her and his lips were pressed to hers. She gave her lips to him without restraint and the world and the black ice of the night faded back into nothingness. They were man and woman, as primitive as the storm that howled now in renewed fury. Then she pushed herself out of his arms, a hurt look in her eyes as if she were remembering.

For a long time he sat there, staring into the embers of the fire, while the greater fire within him slowly burned down and the trembling went from his body. Then he said, "Tell me about Hank Stronheim."

"We're to be married next month," she said.

Again he held her close to him, hurting her with the strength of his arms. His voice was loud in his ears as he said, "You love me. You

can't deny it. You love me as surely as I love you!"

She said, "Please, Chat."

He was all right now. He knew that the fury of the moment was past. He got up and put more wood on the fire, then wrapping the saddle blanket about himself, he laid down near the fire, across the hearth from her. The storm increased. The excitement of the day claimed him and in time he slept.

When he awoke the clear chill dawn was in the air. The fire had burned low and he stirred it up without speaking. There was a weak helplessness within him that would not let him meet her eyes nor let him speak, for last night they had been too close to a moment of greatness. They could never speak of it, he knew.

He saddled the horse and helped her up behind him and together they rode into the rain-washed morning, their breaths leaving streamers of white to trail through the crackling air. Near the gate in the fence she spoke for the first time. "I'll walk from here," she said. "It will be better. I'll say I was alone."

He didn't answer but he understood. Gossip was a thing sometimes more dangerous than a gun. He rode on through the gate, toward the forbidding cluster of his own ranch. And he knew that she was standing there, the new sun on her face, watching him go.

CHAPTER SIX

Shot-in-the Back

HE HAD ridden up the long lane and was was getting ready to unsaddle when the thick voice behind him made him raise his hands and stand motionless. "I been waitin' for you, Conners," the voice said. "Keep 'em up until I see if you got a hide-out gun. I see you got rid of your rifle." A hand snaked around his waist and ran expertly up and down his ribs. "All right," the voice said. "Turn around."

He caught the glint of the sun on the metal star, and he knew immediately the possessor of the voice. Sheriff Chatfield stood there, a .44 in his hand, a satisfied smile twisting his loose lips. "Stick out your hands," the sheriff ordered. "I got a pair of bracelets that'll jest fit you."

"What the hell is this?"

"You wouldn't know now, would you?" the sheriff said, his moist lips smacking over his words. "Poor old Emmett Stronheim layin' out there with a bullet in his back, you ridin' in after bein' out all night."

"Emmett. Dead?"

"You got him, all right. Right through the back of the head. I figured last night you wouldn't take that beatin' layin' down. There's a mean look about you, jest like your dad. Should of locked you up right then. I'll always feel guilty about Emmett."

"For God's sake, Sheriff," Chat said. "You don't think I—" His voice trailed off as he looked into the fishy eyes of the lawman. There was too much satisfaction there. Then the full implication of what was happening hit him. "Sheriff, I can prove I didn't do it. I didn't see Emmett after I left town."

"Oh?" the sheriff said, interest in his eyes. "Where was you all night?"

He started to answer, then caught himself. He could never explain. He shrugged hopelessly and put out his hands. The sheriff chuckled contentedly as he snapped on the handcuffs. "They're waitin' for you in town," the sheriff said. "Quite a crowd of them."

The ride in was a nightmare of conflicting emotions balanced between fear and open rebellion. Twice he thought of trying to make a break for it, but his better judgment told him this would only mark him as guilty and send him out on a twisting trail from which there would be no turning back. He tried to decide on some way in which he could establish his innocence without dragging Julia's name through the whole dirty mess. He could reach no solution. The sheriff slouched in his saddle, singing a senseless song with bawdy words, and that way they came to town.

When the sheriff had said a crowd was waiting he had not exaggerated. Everyone was there, including Vance Jacoby and the old Conners crew and all the nesters. Chat caught sight of Hank Stronheim, a set look on his bloodless face, a coil of rope in his hand, and a chill swept up his back, leaving him weak.

As they rode by a spring wagon he heard a granger address the lean-faced man with the twisted arm who held the reins in his one good hand and he knew that this was Julia's father. Ben Winford gave Chat a stony stare and then the sheriff nudged him on arrogantly, beaming down at the crowd of grim-faced men, looking at Jacoby as if for approval. Vance Jacoby leaned against a post in front of the general merchandise store, his cigar unlighted, a thin smile on his lips. He waved to Chat as they rode by.

In front of the jail a dozen grangers stood with rifles. Together they levered shells into the barrels and refused to move aside. The sheriff waited expectantly, not trying to protect his prisoner. One of the farmers stepped forward. "You don't need to lock him up, Sheriff," the nester said. "We'll take him now."

The creaking sound of a spring wagon came through the ominous stillness and from the tail of his eye Chat saw old Ben Winford cut

the wheels and pull to a standstill. His voice held a lot of authority when he said, "He'll have a trial first, men. We don't do things the way the Conners do."

There was a sudden flurry of excitement and Hank Stronheim pushed his way forward, spilling two men aside in his bull-like haste. He was almost to Chat's horse when Winford called his name. "I said he'll have a trial, Hank," the old man said softly.

Hank Stronheim stood there, the coil of rope in his hand, trembling visibly from the pent-up emotion within him. His eyes met Chat's in cold hatred and he ripped out a string of oaths. Chat held the man's gaze steadily and he said, "Believe me, Hank. I didn't do it."

Under the soft firm voice of Ben Winford the men moved back into a tight circle and Winford pulled his wagon a little closer. The sheriff did nothing to stop this flaunting of the law. He sat there, grinning, and once he winked at one of the girls who had come over from the Blue Goose Saloon. Winford's voice was soft but commanding. "You can have your say, Conners."

Sitting there on his horse, Chat could look down at the upturned faces around him. He saw the women of the town, some of them sharp-featured, eager for anything to break the monotony of their existence. He saw the girls from the saloons and hurdy-gurdies, bright-lipped and tired-eyed. Vance Jacoby and Tim Arnold were there, elbow to elbow. They seemed to be taunting him to answer. Above all was the cold hate-filled eyes of Hank Stronheim, the man Julie Winford was going to marry. Chat watched them all, as they waited for his answer, and he saw in their eyes that nothing he could say would clear him. They had come for a lynching and they meant to have it. He had ten years of hate and mistrust against him. Again he looked into the eyes of Hank Stronheim and again he said, "I didn't do it, Hank."

"He's had his say," Hank Stronheim said flatly. "Get him off that horse."

THEY PRESSED forward willingly, and two men dragged him from the saddle and pushed him roughly toward the middle of the street. Hank Stronheim's face was a dead white as he strode forward and slipped a noose around Chat's neck. There was a flurry of excitement in the crowd, a quick muttering, and then Julia Winford was standing there by Hank, her face as white as his. "You're making a mistake, Hank," she said.

"He made a mistake when he didn't clear out when I told him," Hank Stronheim said.

"Hank, please listen to me!" She was standing close to him now, her face upturned, eyes pleading. "You can't do this."

For a second there was softness in Hank Stronheim's eyes. He said, "I don't like it either, honey. A man's got to do what has to be done."

She turned quickly to the crowd, her head back, chin tilted. "Listen to me," she called. "This man is innocent!"

There was a quick silence, a hushed expectancy from the crowd. The voice of old Ben Winford carried easily in the stillness. "You need more than words to back that up, Julie," the old man said.

She was proud, unafraid, standing there. Her voice was clear in the chill air. "Chat Conners couldn't have killed Emmett," she said flatly. "He was with me—all night!"

There was a quick intake of breath from the men around her, a sudden widening of her father's eyes. Back at the edge of the crowd a woman made a crowing sound in her throat and the girls from across the street laughed boisterously. Chat stepped forward to be near her and Hank Stronheim shoved him back rudely. Hank said, "Maybe you better explain that, Julie."

For a second she looked at Hank, and Chat thought he saw almost disappointment in her eyes. Then she went quickly to the spring wagon and climbed up beside her father. She talked to him hurriedly and Chat felt the old man's eyes boring into him like two hot coals. In time Winford called Hank Stronheim over to the wagon and they conversed in low tones. At last Chat saw Hank nod a reluctant agreement and Ben Winford stood up in the wagon. He said, "We got the wrong man, folks. Sheriff, I'm asking you to turn him loose."

The sheriff swung down from his horse, keen disappointment in his hawk-like face. He slipped the noose from Chat's neck and inserted the key into the lock on Chat's wrist. Leaning forward slightly he said, "Lucky boy, you." He made a clicking sound with his teeth to indicate his double meaning and Chat fought himself to keep from smashing the lawman in the mouth. He hurried over to the wagon where Julia and her father and Hank Stronheim were waiting. Hank reached up roughly, lifted Julia from the wagon and hurried her through the crowd. Old Winford looked down into the eyes of Chat Conners.

"A dog that runs with sheep killers is apt to get in trouble," the old man said. "Thanks for helping my daughter. Me and a couple of the men will be over to your place this afternoon to listen to your proposition."

Chat started to thank the man, but Winford had turned his team, and Chat had to move aside to avoid their tossing heads. He backed straight into the blocky form of Vance Jacoby.

"Close squeeze, kid," Jacoby said.

The full passion of the past few hours was strong in Chat Conners as he faced the man

he knew was responsible for the death of Emmett Stronheim. He grabbed the cattle buyer by the lapels of his coat and pulled him close. The expression on Jacoby's face did not change. His right hand had dipped back under his long coat and had half drawn a .44 from its holster. "I wouldn't start anything if I was you, Chat," he said softly.

Chat released his grip and stepped back, but the hatred in him did not leave. His voice was cold when he said, "Who did you have do it, Vance? Tim Arnold?"

"Don't get ideas, Chat," Jacoby said, smiling now.

"When I find out I'll see you both in hell, Vance. Remember that."

"Whose making threats now?" Vance asked.

"I am," Chat said levelly, "and I intend to back them up."

"Just so we understand each other," Jacoby said. He turned and disappeared into the crowd. Chat mounted his horse and left town at a full gallop.

Back at the ranch he paced the porch impatiently, waiting for Winford and the others to show up. He was anxious to get it over with now. The quicker he could get out of the country, the better he would like it. But he had another job to do now in addition to selling his land and trailing his cattle. Before he left he'd call a gunsmoke showdown with Tim Arnold and Vance Jacoby. The thought of it frightened him a little, for he had never met a man with guns, but he knew that it was the only way out. He stopped his pacing when he saw the distant blob of a spring wagon. That would be Winford. He started thinking about what he should say to the old man about Julia.

By the time the wagon reached the little rise down by the south fence, he could make out the thin frame of old Ben Winford, holding the lines in his one good hand. Two more men sat in back, their legs dangling from the open tail gate. The wagon disappeared from sight, dipping into the low swale where the willows were. He could hear the iron-tired wheels grinding against the stones. Then there was a yell. Three shots smashed through the stillness. The sound of a running horse and the cracking of brush. A splintering crash. Then silence.

Breath pounding in his lungs, apprehension popping beads of perspiration on his forehead, Chat Conners ran toward the hidden swale below the barn. As he came around the turn of the wagon road he saw Winford's wagon, lying on its side, the upmost wheels still spining. Sprawled on the ground were the lifeless forms of two men.

He ran to the wagon and the spooked team shied and plunged, dragging the light wagon deeper into the thicket. He saw the splash of color of a man's coat—a dangling, maimed arm. He walked around the wagon, speaking softly to the team, then stood there, wide-eyed. Ben Winford was dead, a bullet hole through the side of his head. Chat started to lift the dead man from the wagon, then became violently sick.

CHAPTER SEVEN

One Against Death's Battalion

THEY CAME sooner than he had expected, that long line of nester wagons and men on horseback, moving with the quiet determination of men who had come to kill. They must have been waiting just beyond the row of willows where the fence line met the road. Suspicious as always, they had stayed there, awaiting the outcome of Ben Winford's delegation. They had heard the shots and knew their meaning, and now they were coming to put an end to war and bloodshed. Chat watched them come, a cold knot of helplessness in his stomach.

He went back inside the house then and took the .44 from the desk drawer and stuffed it in his belt. From the closet he got the heavy gun-belt and the short barrel saddle gun that had belonged to his father. They were coming to kill him, and the age-old instinct of self-preservation calmed him as he shoved cartridges into the weapons. They were forcing him to fight and he wondered if perhaps this was not the way it had been with his father.

The wagons and horsemen topped the rise across the creek, then dipped down into the brush-screened draw. Here he heard them stop as they came to the scene of carnage there in the bottoms. He could hear the hoarse shouting of men, the cry for blood, then the creaking of harness as the wagons moved up out of the willows toward the lane that led to the ranch house.

Chat levered a shell into his rifle and stood there, waiting. He'd try to talk to them, but if they wouldn't listen. . . A soft cracking sound behind him warned him and he flattened his back against the porch wall. His nostrils flared at the faint odor of cigar smoke. He turned to see Vance Jacoby, thumbs hooked in his belt, standing there, smiling. Behind him was Tim Arnold and the old Conners gun-slick crew. Jacoby said, "Looks like you're in for trouble, Chat. You can always count on your friends when you're in trouble."

Down the road he could hear the steady approach of the nesters and here in front of him he saw the cold, calculating triumph in the eyes of Vance Jacoby. The cattle buyer was having the last say, playing the game exactly the way he had wanted it. Chat saw the eager anticipation of Tim Arnold and his

crew as their hands tightened around their rifles. Jacoby said, "I told you I didn't think you were playing it smart, Chat." He nodded his head to Tim Arnold, then stood back, a smile on his lips.

Arnold came forward slowly, his right hand hanging above the gun in his belt. His mouth, still swollen from the blow he had taken from Chat, was twisted now, and it worked over his words as if he were savoring good food. He said, "I owe you a lot, Conners. You said a lot of things that need answerin'. I hear tell you aim to see me in hell."

He was taunting, coming out openly and telling Chat that he, Arnold, was the one who had killed Stronheim. Chat did not wait for the man to finish speaking. Arnold's hand had not started for his gun. It was hanging there, loosely, the fingers curving slightly. That hard flicker in his eyes told Chat when it was time to act. He tilted the rifle level with his hip and squeezed the trigger. Through the faint fan of smoke he saw Tim Arnold grab his stomach with both hands, saw him stagger forward a step, then turn and fall. He heard Jacoby's surprised curse at the fast action.

Conners swung the rifle, smashing the barrel across Jacoby's face. Chat turned, dodging from side to side, and sprinted across the porch to the heavy front door. Throwing it open he dived inside, hitting the floor flat on his stomach. He kicked the door shut and rolled to one side, bunching his body behind the jutting protection of the wall. A dozen slugs made a splintered pattern shoulder high across the door. He faced a quick buryin', Conners knew.

There was a second of silence in which Chat could hear the startled yells of the nesters. Then he heard the cool voice of Jacoby. Moving to the front window, Chat knocked out the glass with the butt of his rifle. Jacoby's men were moving toward the cover of the out buildings. He drew a bead on one and fired. The man straightened and walked stiffly, his hands above his head. Conners killed two more the same way, then Jacoby's men turned every gun toward that window.

Glass splintered and showered about him and Chat moved along the floor like a wounded lizard, crawling away from the murderous lead that ripped bright furrows in the floor and pocked the walls with gaping holes. He had no time to think of anything except that he must kill or be killed, and he at last threw caution to the wind in his effort to make his bullets count. It was as though he were old Black Jeb now.

There was an elbow protruding from behind the harness shed. Chat snapped a quick shot, heard a scream. Then lead seared his cheek, leaving a hot acrid smell in his nostrils. He dodged to the big side window, looking for Jacoby, but the buyer was keeping himself well concealed.

Once four men broke from cover and ran toward the back corner of the ranchhouse. Chat dropped the rifle in favor of the six-shooter and he emptied the gun at the dodging figures. One dropped, but the others went on and were lost to view behind the corner of the house. The firing stopped suddenly, and out behind the sheds he could hear the voice of Jacoby and the sudden running of men. Then there was a creak of leather and the pounding of hoofs and Jacoby and his crew went down the lane at a full gallop, guns blazing death into the bunched ranks of the oncoming nesters.

HELPLESSLY Chat stood there in the center of the room, cursing like a madman. There were still those three men who had disappeared around the corner of the house. If he tried to make a break to help the nesters he would never get away from the front porch. He snatched up the rifle and ran to the front window. He could see the bunched Jacoby riders and he drew a fine bead and started firing. They scattered some and a horse went down, but his last attempt had had little effect on the overall slaughter that was to follow. He lowered the gun and stood there, helpless, and then the smell of smoke cut through the room and a red wisp of flame seeped under the dining room door. The three men out back had fired the house!

He ran to the dining room door and the panels felt hot against his hands. Opening it a crack, he saw the inferno beyond that door. A searing sheet of flame came through the opening. He closed the door, throwing his arms across his face to shield it from the heat.

The smoke was thick now. It came in clouds that smothered his lungs and set him to coughing. His eyes were streaming so that he had to grope his way around. The door to the dining room gave way and the flame came into the room, seeking new fuel.

He backed away, back toward the front door, and suddenly he realized that this was what those men outside wanted and expected. They'd be waiting out there to shoot him as he came through.

Ripping off his coat, he bound it loosely around his face, pausing only to get his bearings. Then, grasping his rifle, he dived into the wall of flame, plunged diagonally across the room through the searing mass, and crashed his body against the big side window. The brittle sash splintered under his weight and the crashing of glass was puny against the crackling of the cheated flames.

For a second he lay in the dirt outside, gasping in the cold air. Above his head the

fire reached out the broken window and dipped ever-lengthening fingers as if searching out the victim they had lost. Then he remembered the three men who would be waiting for him, death in their hands, and he started crawling toward the end of the front porch.

He had figured right, for they stood there expectantly like men at a carnival shooting gallery waiting for the moving target to appear. He gave no quarter but fired as they would have fired. Two men fell from his three bullets. The third turned, plunged behind the scant protection of a porch pillar. His arm came up and the lead from his sixgun ripped splinters that stung Chat's face. He fired again. Chat took his time and aimed high. The other man fell.

He became suddenly conscious of the heat around him and he saw the blood on his hands where the jagged window had cut him. His lungs were two dried-out leathery things hanging like weights in the cavity of his chest. His legs had a leaden, aching feeling about them. He staggered away from the fast-crumbling building, out into the safety of the open. Vaguely he saw men pressing in around him and he threw away his gun. He had lost. It was no use. The voice of Hank Stronheim brought him back to his senses. The lean gray faces of the nesters circled around him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Last Search

THEY MOVED away from the inferno that was the ranchhouse and went to stand in a silent group on the small rise of ground by the barn. Looking back, Chat saw the passing of his old life in the crashing walls of the place he had called home, and it gave him new strength. It was as if all the hatred, the dishonesty and the bloodshed he had known was being consumed by the hungry flames. He turned to Hank Stronheim who stood next to him and said, "It was Tim Arnold that killed your brother, Hank."

The young nester extended his hand. "Thanks," he said simply. He stood there akwardly, grasping Chat's hand. Finding no other common ground he said, "We'll help you rebuild the house."

Chat Conners shook his head. "I'm going north someplace."

"There's room for everybody, if they understand each other," Hank Stronheim said.

"It's no use, Hank."

There was nothing more he could say then. Before he left he'd put it into words, tell them he wanted the cold green wind of the north in his nostrils, a new land at his feet. He'd make it sound right, somehow. He couldn't explain to them the feeling of this place that would always be with him, crushing him, gnawing at him. Above all he could never explain to this man that it would be impossible to live here knowing that the woman he loved was married to another man. A lean-faced farmer rode up on a mule and threw himself from the saddle. He said, "Jacoby must have got away, Hank. I'll send some of the boys on his trail."

Chat Conners felt a coolness he had never known. "I'll go, Hank," he said softly.

The young farmer stood there looking at the young cattle king. A quick understanding passed between them. Hank said, "You don't need to."

"It's the way I want it," Chat said.

He borrowed a rifle from one of the men and mounted a horse they brought him. He took one last look at the fast-dying flames that now hovered over a blackened pile of rubble. "When I come back we'll make a deal that's good for both of us," he said to the men. Then he touched his horse with his heels and headed down the road toward town. He was near the creek before he realized Hank Stronheim was following.

They didn't speak for some time, but rode knee to knee, knowing each other by their silence. It was Hank who said, "Suppose you don't come back, Conners?"

"You and her take care of it then," Chat said. "Tell her I wanted it that way." He hoped Hank would understand.

The young nester stared straight ahead, his face showing no emotion. He said, "She's in town. I'll tell her, Chat."

They did not speak again until they came to the edge of town. There Chat turned in his saddle and said, "I'll handle it alone, Hank."

The young nester nodded. He said, "Luck, Chat."

Chat Conners rode slowly down the street. Up from the Blue Goose he dismounted and tied his horse to the hitch rail. Then he lifted the rifle from the saddle scabbard and checked it to see that it was loaded. He looked up and down the deserted street, then went on to the saloon, the rifle in his hand. The bartender looked up and ran his tongue across his lips.

Chat said, "Vance Jacoby been here?"

The bartender shook his head. His round eyes seemed to stand still while his face moved around them.

Chat said, "When he comes in tell him I'm looking for him."

The bartender nodded.

Conners went to two more saloons after that, and in the second one he had a drink. The bartender said, "He was here a little ago. He aims to leave town."

Chat paid for the drink. "He won't be leaving," he said.

He went back out on the street then. Two

men saw him and moved close to the shelter of a building. Chat's grip on the rifle tightened. He walked slowly up the sidewalk in the direction of the Blue Goose. The door opened and Vance Jacoby came out on the board sidewalk. He had taken off his long coat. There were fancy garters holding up his full silk sleeves. He said, "I hear you're looking for me, Chat."

"You hear right, Vance," Chat Conners said.

They stood there, fifty feet apart, Conners with the rifle in his hand, Vance Jacoby with a .44 strapped to his side. Jacoby had his ever present cigar clamped in his teeth. It twisted his round face and set his black mustache at a queer angle.

"Maybe you better think it over, Chat," the cattle buyer said.

"I've thought it over Vance," Chat said.

VANCE JACOBY accepted that. He spat out the cigar and Chat jerked nervously at the sudden movement. Jacoby laughed. A high taunting laugh that jeered at the impudence of this kid who dared meet him. Then his hand dipped.

His gun was out, spilling its first load of death, even before Chat could pull the trigger of the rifle. Jacoby's first bullet seared close, the heat of it burning Chat's arm. The second one went way wide, for Chat had fired and the more accurate bore of the rifle had not missed.

Jacoby fought viciously as he felt the slug rip through his chest. He fired twice more, but Chat had dodged to the protection of a pile of barrels. Jacoby's aim was wild now. He was dying on his feet, refusing to fall. Chat stood there openly and pumped the second shot into the weaving body of the cattle buyer. He turned on his heel then, tossing the rifle to the sidewalk. He walked back down the street toward where his horse was plunging against its tied reins. He hardly heard his name being called over and over.

She ran up the street, calling him over and over, and at last he stopped and waited, an emotion in him that drove out all thought of the violence he had just been part of. She came to him, threw her arms around him and pressed her head tightly against his chest. "Chat. Chat." She kept saying it. Then she tilted her tear-streaked face toward his and the sun seemed to break through the scattered clouds as he kissed her and felt her arms tighten around him. He raised his eyes and saw Hank Stronheim standing there, watching them.

There was an expression on the nester's face that trembled and tried to form a smile. His eyes held a dead hurt look. Chat said, "I'm sorry, Hank."

Hank Stronheim seemed to find strength in the sound of Chat's voice. The smile found its way around his lips, weakly, but it stayed. He dug the toe of his boot into the dust of the street, then said, "It's all right, Chat. There's some things a man can't explain. One is the way folks mistrust each other. Another is the way a woman's love might go." He offered Chat his hand.

Julia Winford placed both her hands over the clasped hands of the two men. She said, "I'll remember you more for this Hank than anything else."

Hank was embarrassed now. There was nothing more to say in the matter. He said, "Still set on movin' north, Chat?"

"It's best that way," Chat Conners said.

"I'll see what I can do about rounding up a good crew for you," Hank Stronheim said. It was his way of saying that everything was all right with him now. He started down the street, his broad back toward them, his shoulders squared. Then he turned and looked back at them, standing there, lost in each other. He said, "And mind you now, Julie. Take care of yourself up there in that north country."

THE END

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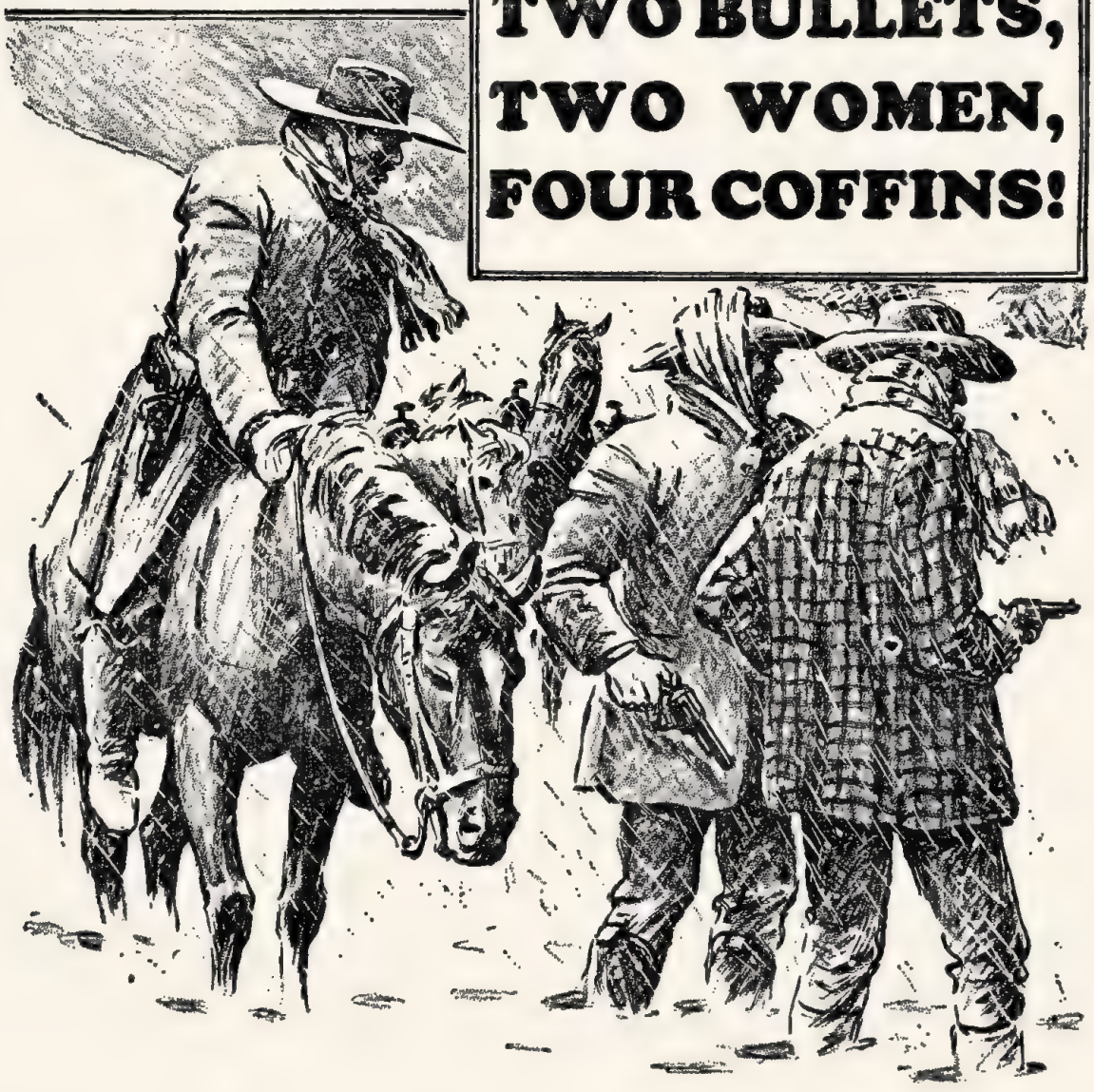
The smallest of the men said, "My God, it's Sam Howland!"

TWO BULLETS, TWO WOMEN, FOUR COFFINS!



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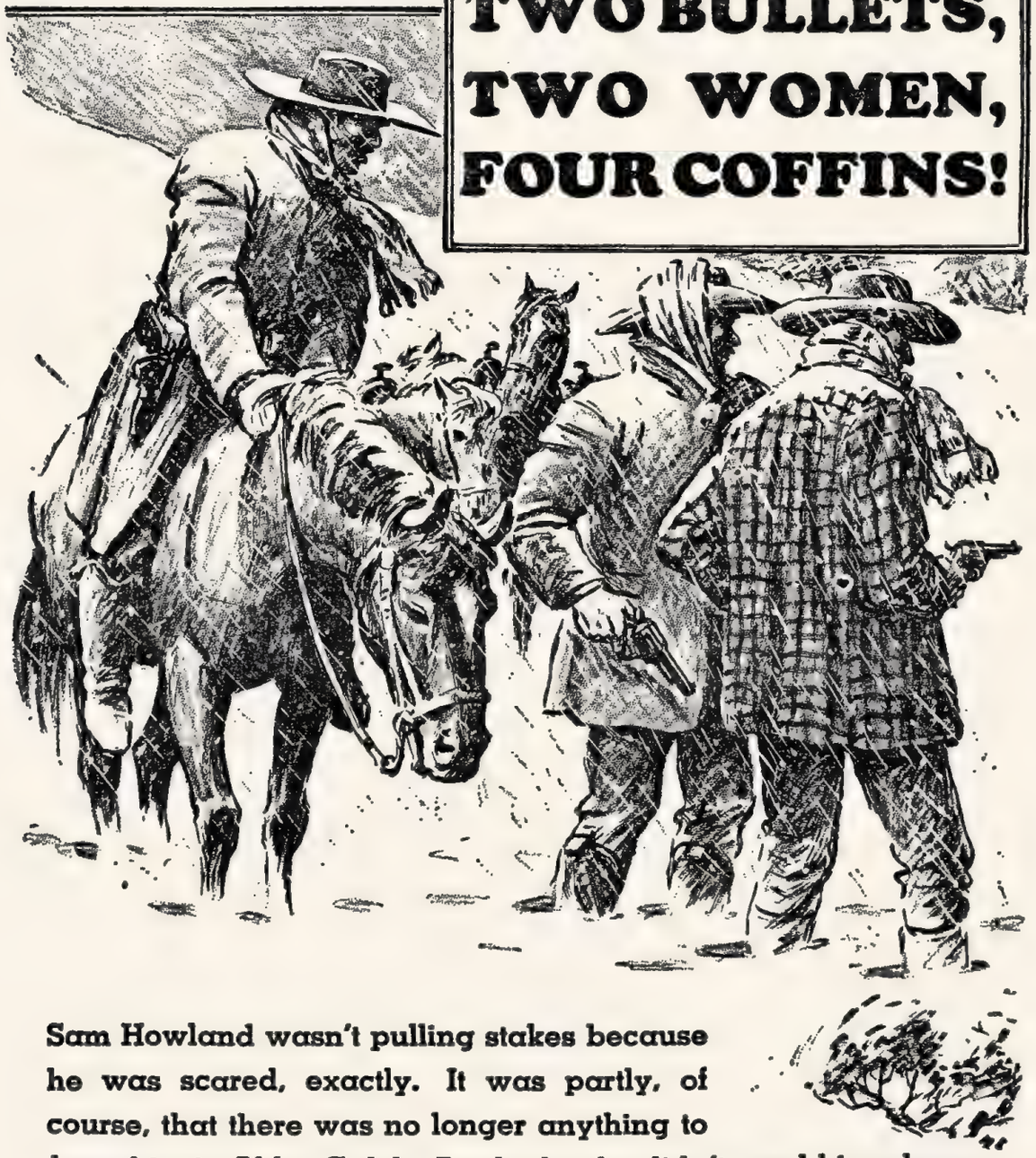

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Abandoned Fortune

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States as soon as he checked in the revenue receipts he carried. Which would be after he settled the business that was taking him to Alder Gulch. Business he would handle without shooting, if possible, but with whatever amount it required, if necessary.

He wasn't pulling stakes because he was scared, exactly. It was partly, of course, that there was no longer anything here to keep him. Partly that he didn't need his salary—he had a hundred and four thousand dollars in the Seattle banks from his share in several digs at the Gulch and elsewhere—and partly that something told him his luck was being pushed too far.

Which feeling amounted, in the long run, to being scared. And when you lost your nerve in this country, you were in for it. In a land where all desirable things were scarce, there was always someone ready to step in and take what a man couldn't hold, whether it be his life, his money or his woman.

Well, he didn't have to worry now about losing his woman. She had taken care of that by going off to Alder Gulch with this man he was looking for—John Murchison—who owned a string of honkies and gambling dives at Lewiston, Bannack and the Gulch. Murchison had come out here and got his start as a contractor bringing in supplies to the Army post at Salt Lake.

Howland saw a plume of dust behind and a moment later made out four men as their horses moved through a break in the brush. The highwaymen who had so nearly got him. If they hadn't already struck his trail—or seen him here—it would be only a matter of minutes.

The bullet crease on his ear and jaw burned afresh as he slung the saddle bags on the mule and jumped up. The animal had taken new heart from his rest.

Howland had hoped to keep to the road but he saw he was going to be cut off if he did, so he turned sharply to the left across broken country. It evidently made no difference to the men that he might recognize them, for they wore no masks. That meant that they were working on the principle that dead men don't tell who robbed them. It worked, too. Besides the unknown number of miners who had been killed trying to get back to the States with their pile, more than a hundred-and-seventy were known to have been murdered and robbed in the Lewiston country alone. Not one of them had told who did it, of course.

Howland saw it was going to be a close thing. The big mule was laboring hard as a jut of rock shielded them. Howland flung the saddle bags off down the slope into the sparse brush that cropped out of rubble. Then he slipped behind the cantle, took one of the rifles from its boot, drew the skinning knife he wore by his pistol and clipped the girth. He almost went with the heavy saddle as he got rid of it, but in a second he had regained his seat.

Almost instantly the wounded mule took fresh courage. Ten minutes later, with a few futile shots, his pursuers dropped the chase—or seemed to.

Howland didn't know whether they knew he had got rid of dust and saddle, for they were not riding on his trail but converging with it ahead of where he ditched the stuff. No matter, either way. If they hadn't found the dust, it would lie there safely for weeks. If they had, there was nothing he could do about it now.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when he hit the near end of the Gulch. He had let the mule take its time but had kept it going lest its wounded leg stiffen up.

Fire had taken the alders and now, side by side along the muddy road for twelve miles, were canvas-walled deadfalls and honkies which each night garnered what had been taken by the miners during the day. Some were owned by Murchison, but which ones he didn't know. Murchison's pile would certainly dwarf the modest fortune Howland had made. Yet, Howland didn't think it was for money Trilby had gone off with the man. He could stand it better if he could think it was for money, instead of for Murchison himself.

Miners looked up from pans, rockers and sluices as he rode past. The greetings several gave were muted by the clatter of digging and the grate of shovels in rock, the tumbling of dirt and stone down sluices. Howland was a medium-built man, his black brows heavy, and he had a natural dignity and aloofness that came in handy now as he nodded to those he knew by sight. He spoke the names and a word of greeting to several friends, but didn't halt, and no man tried to stop him.

He knew definitely, now, from the way they looked at him, and from the startled stares of the harpies at deadfall doors and windows, that Trilby and Murchison were here. The sooner he found them, the better. Yet he wouldn't ask anyone where to find them. He didn't want to discuss the matter at all.

There was no use hanging his head, though it shamed him for it to be known that he couldn't hold his wife, and he sat stiffly upright with no more expression on his face than was naturally there. Even though he had lost her, yet he had loved her until she did this. And because of what she had meant to him, and because he still felt in his heart he had once meant something to her, he had come here. It would have been easier to go

where no man had ever heard his name. And, when this was settled, that's what he would do.

If it were simply a question of property or money, the only safe and decent thing to do would be to kill Murchison in self-interest and the general interest of society. But the problem was not so simple as that. It was women who were scarce—particularly decent ones. Trilby had stepped across the line, and there was no way for her to step back across unless he took her hand and helped her. He could not do that by killing Murchison. If he did kill him, the girl could do nothing but drift from man to man for a year or so, each successive one a little lower in the scale than the last, and end up in a deadfall herself. He had seen it happen before. He knew the pattern.

He sighted, shifting on the mule's bare back as he watched sharply for Murchison's horse along the muddy trail before the honkies. Not that Trilby had lied to him. She had never told him she loved him. And the part that hurt the worst in this entire deal was that she let him learn about her and Murchison through gossip instead of just saying, "Thanks, Sam, for a nice year, but it's over now."

His heart had calmed a bit from the hard beating it had started as he neared the Gulch, but now it picked up again and he stiffened as around him he heard the sharp, almost soundless exclamations of workmen at the creek, and of loungers and barflies at the deadfalls. In one, a girl laughed half hysterically and cried, "Here, let me where I can see!"

Ahead, Howland saw Murchison and Trilby approaching on matched black horses. They had sighted him now but evidently they had decided beforehand what they would do when this finally happened, for they came on. Trilby looked at Murchison uncertainly. Murchison kept his eyes steadily forward.

CHAPTER TWO

Wedding at the Diggings

ALREADY on Trilby's side of the road, Howland kept his course. He had the Henry cradled under his left arm and now he shifted the reins to that hand, letting his right one hang free by his pistol and knife. When they almost converged Howland halted and raised his hat. He was looking at the yellow-headed girl, but he was watching enough to catch any movement of Murchison's hands.

Like himself, he knew Murchison realized parts were being played before a crowd and that the man would not wish to leave the scene feeling he had been bested.

Dark eyes narrowed, Murchison drawled, "That's quite a steed you're riding, Howland. And such a fine saddle!"

It occurred to Howland, somehow, from the man's tone, that the road agents back there had had in mind to shoot him to keep him from coming here; that they were hired by Murchison to do the trick, and that perhaps they didn't know he had been carrying all that dust. He ignored Murchison entirely.

He tried to appear casual and to keep his hand steady as he drew a paper from his coat pocket. Trilby was pale, her gray eyes watchful and fearful, but not ashamed. There was defiance in the way she sat her horse. She opened her lips as if to speak, but the words stuck in her throat.

Unsteadily Howland said, "I got a divorce when I got back to Lewiston from Seattle." He tapped the paper on the bridle reins. "This is your copy of the bill." He looked at Murchison, who was watching him with all the wariness and friendliness of a coiled diamondback. His big, handsome features were flushed and a little drawn—as if he hadn't been getting the sleep he should.

Howland's voice was steady enough now. He said, "I'll give you thirty minutes to marry her. It will take us just about that long to get to Laffoon's dig and get him to do the job if we start now."

Murchison drawled. "Damn you, Howland, you know how to put a man in a tough spot, don't you?" He shook his head. "I have to admire the way you've done it. If I go ahead and marry her, you'll think I'm scared of you, and if I don't, I'll be the world's prize fool."

"That's right," Howland said. He dragged out his watch, the fancy winding key he wore as a fob clinking against the heavy case.

"So I'll go ahead and marry her," Murchison went on unhurriedly, "but you take care of yourself next time we meet."

"We can meet as soon as the wedding's over, if you want it that way," Howland agreed. He added, "I'm making this just thirty minutes so your friends will have time to get the grave dug this afternoon in case you do change your mind. Let's get going."

He offered the paper to the girl.

White-faced, she said, "Sam!"

Abruptly he could go no further with the matter. His resolution to go and see them actually married was crumbling. He leaned to jam the bill of divorcement between her hand and her bridle reins, and the perfume she used was sweet and heavy in his nostrils and potent with old memories.

Perhaps, he reflected later, she had been fearful when she first saw him carrying that rifle that he intended killing both her and Murchison. But now something changed her. Perhaps anger that he wasn't trying to get

her back. Or anger that he was making it his business to shotgun her into a wedding with another man. Or perhaps she only saw the sudden weakness in his eyes and face.

Whatever it was, her pallor vanished and she flushed. Chin high, she flashed Murchison a smile. "He's really cutting a brave figure, isn't he? Let's go."

She whirled her black horse about and repeated, "Let's go, John," to Murchison. And, to Howland: "Coming, Sam?"

"I've more important things to see about," Howland drawled.

But inside he had the feeling he had had when he sulked in a corner as a child, punishing his mother by refusing to eat. With a short, bitter oath, he rode down the steep, rocky bank to the creek and up-stream a hundred yards to a claim he had an interest in. Murchison hadn't moved as he started, and he still wasn't sure but what he and Trilby were there because of the noise of his mule's hoofs and the laughter from a bar, and the noise of the miners as they self-consciously stopped watching him and fell to work.

Swinging a leg across the mule, he slid down and nodded at his wizened little partner. "How's she running, Purd?" And from the tail of his eye he saw that Murchison and Trilby were almost out of sight toward Laffoon's dig.

An hour later, when the grapevine brought the news down the creek, from dig to dig, that they were married, he and Purd had probed the rifle ball from the mule's haunch, after throwing and pigging him down. It had been nearly spent and wasn't in more than a finger's depth.

Howland was glad to have something to take up his time and his mind but he felt as self-conscious as he did tired as he let the mule up and took him down the creek to where he could get food and fodder. So she was married. And the words she had spoken still rankled and burned within him.

HOWLAND often thought, during the next two months as winter approached, that he had aged a year for each week. He was weary, now, as he rode southward with a string of Mormon freighters. He had been relieved of his revenue job for throwing that sixty pounds of dust away. Under other circumstances—since the dust and his saddle and his other rifle had been found by the four outlaws—he would have made the value good out of his own pocket. But he was edgy with what he had been through over Trilby, and the commissioner had given out a few remarks about tossing aside twelve thousand dollars instead of standing and fighting. In a moment, hot words had flashed from either side and now Howland was out of a job.

No, he wouldn't be bothering the miners here in southern Idaho and northern Utah with his collections on this trip. The day he had gone to make Murchison and Trilby marry, he had told himself he would never be able to love another woman.

But the way she had acted, there at the last, as if saying, "The poor simpleton is still in love with me and doesn't have enough self-respect to kill the man who took me." The way she had acted had brought a quick, fierce anger bubbling up within him, and it had not yet cooled.

It would be cool enough, though, smothered by his triumph, when he took another wife up to the Gulch. The Mormon girls were pretty. If necessary, to get one of them, he would become a Saint. He had had dealings with old Brigham and, as a man, he liked him. Howland had acted as go-between between him and the Army when the trouble looked like it wasn't going to stop without the sands running red. Yet, he had never presumed to the very faintest extent on his friendship.

He got along with the Saints, when among them, by not discussing their religion or shining up to their girls nor going to gatherings where their women would be present. Curry, the collector who had preceded him, hadn't followed that plan. He was a man who had never known when to talk and when to listen and when not to strip a woman with his look. Aye, well, he had learned. The hard way.

Howland sighed, shifting his sweating legs, caked white with soda, in the saddle. He was tired and his big mule was fagged from walking in the loose alkali, in spite of the fact that the led horse was carrying the bed roll, cook and grub pack and the rifle Howland had bought to replace the Henry he had thrown away.

He ran a dry tongue over his cracked lips, leaning forward a bit to miss the soda that spun up in a fine, fluffy cloud from the mule's forefeet. Yes, he'd pick the prettiest little Saint in the whole damned dried-up country and tell her he loved her and marry her and take her back with him—on a business trip, he'd have to say, maybe. He didn't particularly care what he had to say. He'd dress her up like a St. Louis gambler's woman in the swellest clothes that could be brought from Frisco—clothes he had ordered before he came southward and which might have to be changed a little to fit her—and parade her under Trilby's nose.

The wheels of the big wagons, strung out for a while to avoid each other's dust, whined and screeched in the soda, as if going across snow that had packed and run together under a sudden shower. The skinners riding the near-wheelers were white as millers, and sev-

eral of them—like Anders who owned the wagons, and who drove the lead one there at Howland's left—were mean as grizzlies in the spring. For the sun was brassy and the water barrels had run out last night and the men who had women waiting for them at Soda Tanks, now two hours' drive ahead, had gone almost dry since then. The sinks the road led past today were full of alkali, and that played hob with romance until sometimes Howland wondered how there ever happened to be any kids born in this country at all. Anders had recently taken another wife, much younger than his other two, and she ran the hotel at the Tanks.

A sharp croak escaped the man. Howland half turned to look at him, and then his eyes jerked ahead to where Anders was staring, entranced. The trail had turned so that now, shimmering in the haze, the village was coming into sight six miles away, though it looked as if it were hardly a half.

CHAPTER THREE

"Hello, N'Awleans!"

IT WASN'T built level but sprawled up the bleak red mountain from which the miners gouged the rich silver chlorides. Howland had a small stake in one hole there that was running a hundred ounces of silver to the ton—which sounded good until you saw some of the California and Salt Lake ores running two thousand ounces. High grade so rich that when a mine was near enough to the sea the owners were sending the ore all the way to Wales to be milled and smelted by superior processes which the English wouldn't license for use outside their own country.

Howland's mind ran over the girls in the Tanks, but the only one he would have wanted to parade under Trilby's nose was the one Anders had married. Used to waiting on the table at the hotel which she and Anders now owned, she had always seen that when there was a deer saddle Howland got a crusty outside piece, and she always brought a pitcher of water from the cellar to his room. If Anders hadn't up and married her. . . .

A few months ago, Howland would have been scarecly able to forebear a grin, in spite of the misery he knew Anders was in, as he watched the fellow eye the acrid water of the sink hole they were now approaching. It was at the foot of the nine-hundred foot bluff, there by the water, that the body of Curry, the collector who preceded Howland on this job, was found filled with arrows. Only, some of the Gentile miners whispered, a bullet hole was in the top of his head. No Indian anyone had ever seen could have put the hole there from the brow of that bluff. White man's work. And the arrows had gone into Curry after he was dead. Not for the dust he carried, for he carried none. He had checked it in. Some said the fool had done one thing and some another, but everyone mentioned a woman. Howland shook his head absently. The Mormons handled the thing right. He should have used their justice on Murchison.

The mules, flour-white like Anders, splatted out into the water. Red with iron until disturbed, it swirled milkily around their feet as they dipped their muzzles again and again to take short, bitter sips. Howland's animals showed no inclination to drink, so he rode on and presently he heard the crack of Anders' whip, urging the eight mules ahead. From the tail of his eye he saw the heap of stones that marked Curry's grave but he didn't turn his head. . . .

Howland had cared for his animals at the wagon yard across from the tavern by the time Anders pulled in. He tossed his bedroll and grub and cook pack into the livery office, hung up his saddle and carried rifles and saddle bags across the yard toward the street. The wind had risen. Sand, soda, mine smelter tailings and fumes came kiting along.

He pulled his hat down solidly and ducked his head against his shoulder to shield his eyes. Tomorrow, if the brewing rain hadn't took mean, he would drift on down the line. There were girls with dark eyes down there.

He fetched solidly up against someone and he went back a step and looked into the hazel eyes of a girl. Had he done what he wanted to, the hellish mood he was in, he would have growled something approaching an apology and gone on past her. But from the look of things, since he had made up his mind to burden himself with a woman, he guessed there was no use dragging his riding stock over any more of this country. And besides, the roads were going to get mean to travel. He wondered who she was.

A bit of color was touching her cheekbones, but her eyes met his steadily like those of a woman who knows her way around.

He touched his hat, and squinting against a fresh gust of wind, he drawled, "Hello, Utah." He was as surprised as the girl looked to be, for usually he was either very reserved or very courtly around women.

But her look never faltered, though the color spread a bit on her cheeks. And then she drawled, "Hello, N'Awleans—but this happens to be Idaho. You're not in Utah till you get across the street."

Howland eyed her suspiciously. "I know," he agreed. "How'd you know I'm from New Orleans?"

"You'd never guess," she told him. She

was past him, then, fighting her skirts down against the wind as she hurried to the store next to the wagon yard.

Howland said, "Well, I'll—just—be—double—damned!"

He stood staring after her until she disappeared into the dimness of the store, and then he went on to the stone and adobe and cedar-log tavern.

DRINKING water was a dollar a man's first day here—and fifty cents a day afterward—but the girl Anders had married was getting a huge pan of it from the barrel to carry over to her husband as if it were free as air. But she didn't meet Howland's eye except for a fleeting glance as he took off his hat to cool his head and said, "Evenin', Mrs. Anders."

"Evening," she said. Then: "Aren't—aren't we friends enough for you still to call me Rosalia?"

"Are we?" he asked. And then, keeping the light touch as she colored a bit, he said, "You're never calling me anything but Mr. Howland, as I recall."

"But that's all I ever called you."

Across the street, Anders bawled hoarsely, "Water!"

"I'm coming!" She dipped again to level the pan. And lightly now to Howland, "Barrels ran dry again?"

"Plumb dry. Last night."

"I better hurry." She added, "I s'pose you're right about my name." Then flashing him a look over her shoulder, she colored violently. "I hope you don't think—"

"I think you're my friend," Howland told her sincerely.

She hurried on and Howland scooped up a dipperful of water. Luxuriously he washed the dry,cottony slime and grit out of his mouth as he watched the girl approach Anders. Then his look moved to the doorway of the store but he couldn't see the woman who had called him N'Awleans. If he'd had his wits about him, he could have found out about her from Rosalia.

He let the water dribble from his lips into the pan for the chickens by the step. After that he drank slowly and deeply, but not enough to make him sick. He filled his water bag then and went on in.

The room he usually had—always a private one, because of the government property he carried—didn't seem to be occupied, so he went in and shut the door. Swiftly he cleaned the alkali from his rifles and pistols and oiled them from the can off his saddle bag. Testing the actions, he re-loaded, and then he peeled off his clothes and shook out the soda that hadn't caked into his sweat. Coughing as the dust settled, he rubbed the crusty patches off between his hands.

Ordinarily he would wash shirt and socks tonight and have them dry and clean by morning, for otherwise he would be raw around his toes and under his arms by this time tomorrow if it was as hot as today. But now he wished he had something clean for tonight, except the heavy winter suit in his bedroll over at the livery. Maybe he could manage to meet the girl.

Thoughtfully he shaved and put the clothes back on and stepped out the side window and went down to Falter and Company, General Mercantile.

Falter let him take a bath in the back room in some water that was so hard lye wouldn't have broken it. Then, stuffing the tail of his new shirt into his new pants, he came out and casually selected a brown silk neckerchief for a cravat, and with his package of old clothes under his arm he went back toward the tavern. He hadn't mentioned the strange woman to Falter. She didn't have the look of a married woman. He just hadn't wanted to discuss her with the man. Rosalia, she was the one to ask. No use stirring up a hornet's nest until he already had the girl out of the country, if she was now marked out as the property of some rich bishop.

The town was filled with the steady grinding beat of the ore mills, run by man, mule and wind power, and smoke and gases poured down from the little smelters as Howland stepped upon the front porch of the tavern. Anders was still over in the wagon yard, evidently collecting freightage from customers who had brought rigs and wagons for stuff he had hauled in for them.

Howland went in and hung his hat on the hall tree. From the dining room, he heard the girl he had called Utah say, "Well, I suppose it's in the way you look at it—but I think it would drive me out of my mind to know that my husband had another wife and that he was with her when he was away from me."

Rosalia said, "But isn't it better to know he's with her than not to know who he is with? And after all, to have part of a good man, as they say, is better than to have all of—" She turned. "Mr. Howland? I'll be setting three tables tonight by the time I'm through. Would you like to go ahead and eat now?"

"Thanks, yes," Howland said. He went in. The other girl was already eating and after a fleeting glance at Howland she paid close attention to her plate.

Mrs. Anders said, "Sit right—" She looked wildly toward the kitchen, sniffing the air, and cried, "Oh, dear!" and ran from the room.

Howland sat down across from the stranger,

and in his most engaging way he said, "I fear I wasn't properly apologetic for running over you out there in the street, Miss—"

"Oh, that's entirely all right." Abruptly, she smiled at him. "What a memory you have, Sam! Don't you recall the prize you won when the *Cormorant* beat the *Crescent* in the race from New Orleans to St. Louis?"

HOWLAND stared at her unbelievingly as recollection flooded back. He had been a cub pilot on the river in those days, and he and another cub were shining up to Aurora Griffin. She lived in St. Louis and had promised to attend the Pilots' Ball with the one of the two cubs whose boat won the long-planned race.

She smiled now as he rose and took her hand and spoke her name. She said, "You would have thought me forward, Sam, had I just up and gone to that ball with you. But I knew the *Cormorant* would win."

"I wasn't so sure!"

"How are you?" she asked. "Mrs. Anders promised she wouldn't tell you I was here. She says you're married."

It came to Howland that no one down here knew what had happened with him and Trilby and Murchison. He had joined the Mormon freighters at War Cry, and certainly there was nothing that they had heard, and certainly he had told them nothing.

He repeated her question, "How are you? What brings you here?"

She laughed again. "What would bring a woman across this terrible country?"

Howland laughed. "Who *is* the dog? Why couldn't this have happened to me?"

"Well, after all," Aurora told him, "you have one wife."

"Two or three is the fashion in this country," he drawled. "But they have to keep 'em apart, usually, to prevent hair-pulling. As a matter of fact," he added, "I'm down here looking for a wife."

Aurora looked at him uncertainly. She said, "Are you serious? Sam, have you become—are you a—"

He laughed. Rosalia was whipping something in a bowl in the kitchen until he knew she couldn't hear it thunder. He said, "I'm going to become one if necessary to get me another wife. The one I had left me for a better man."

"Oh-h-h!" Sympathy mingled now with the uncertainty in her eyes.

He said, "There aren't any women at the camps a man would want to marry so I'm down here on a woman hunt. Does that sound a little crude?"

"Why should it?" Aurora demanded. "Isn't that what wars are really fought over, and seas crossed, and trails made across the country—to make decent homes, I mean, and to live with someone you love—?" She smiled abruptly. "That sounds like a love novel, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Anders came from the kitchen with a steaming bowl. She said, "You all better fall to. Those teamsters will be here any minute, and then the mines will shut down." She smiled at Howland, glanced at Aurora, then back at him. "Surprised?"

"Surprised," Howland agreed.

Mrs. Anders said, "Mrs. Murchison said that for the first few hundred miles of her desert trip she was afraid she was going to die and the last few hundred she was afraid she wasn't. She says her husband has some mining interests up at the Gulch, although they're going to live at Salt Lake, and I told her you would know him if he's from up there." She raised her brows questioningly. "John Murchison, his name is."

Aurora had sat down. Howland stared at her numbly. He saw now that she wore a wedding ring which had not shown through her glove there on the street.

"What's the matter?" Aurora asked. "Is John sick . . . or something?"

"THE reason he didn't meet you?" Howland asked. He had on his poker face, or thought he had until Aurora asked him what was the matter with him. Now he steadied his hand and busied himself dipping black-eyed peas into his plate. "He's all right. He did get a foot hurt in the Little Beauty mine—lost a couple of toes was all—and has to keep it propped up on a pillow for a while yet."

Aurora said, "You're not—look—Sam, I'm no child. He didn't lose his foot?"

"In a rock fall," Howland told her, "if you lose a foot you lose everything. Rock comes straight down. He had just started to take a step. If he had taken it, he would have been mashed flat. No. If I was acting funny it was because I was just so teetotally flabbergasted. I knew you were coming, of course. That is, I knew Murchison's wife was coming, but I had no idea she'd be *you.*" Now he heard himself say, "He asked me to bring you up—if you weren't scared of my looks—in case I find a wife down here to chaperone us."

"A wife?" Rosalia Anders repeated.

"It's a long story," Howland told her, "and you're bread is burning."

"A *wife?*" Rosalia demanded. "You—" And in spite of himself and in spite of the fierce, ugly anger beating within him at this dirty trick of Murchison's of marrying two women, Howland couldn't help seeing what was in the girl's eyes: It was her heart—and her face was saying, "Why couldn't this have happened six months ago?" Then she spoke again:

"Your other wife?" She kept staring at him.

Embarrassed and humble in the midst of his anger, the truculent damnation for all women that had been in his heart as he came down here faded away. He said briefly, "I have none."

Rosalia turned and went back to her kitchen and Howland took a bite of peas without tasting them. Of all the lousy crimes Murchison had committed, this was the worst Howland knew about. Certainly Trilby was not the kind of woman to want to become an extra wife, any more than Aurora was. He stopped chewing, startled. Why, if the man already had a wife, then Trilby wasn't married to him!

He forgot his pride, thinking only of that. He could take her away. By now she was probably fed up with the fellow and sick of her bargain.

He shot Aurora a glance. She was still looking at him oddly. He said, "I had no idea you and Murchison were even acquainted. He's Texas-raised."

"Well," Aurora explained, "he came to St. Joe last year—seventeen months ago, it was—buying Army supplies. He's a contractor, you know."

Howland started to say, "Was a contractor, you mean," but he didn't want to interrupt her.

". . . and I was visiting at Kansas City. You remember my Cousin Julie? Well, she married a man named Hodfelter and they were leaving for Seattle to live, so I was visiting them. I happened to meet John when we drove to St. Joe. We fell in love and were married but I was ill and I couldn't make the trip back just then, and so . . ." She smiled. "Well, here I am."

The teamsters were coming in to eat. "Look," Howland said, "swallow your grub and let's take a turn down the street and back. It's cooled off twenty degrees out there."

She laughed. "Swallow my grub! Is that the way they say it out here?"

Howland shrugged. "I guess I've become just a diamond in the rough."

She rose. "Well, I'd finished anyway. I'll get a scarf, if you really meant that invitation."

"I did."

"Then swallow your grub!" she counseled.

CHAPTER FOUR

Train for Alder Gulch

FALTER gave them a sardonic look when they entered the store an hour later, and he spared another look for the clothing and the silk neckerchief Howland had bought, but he spoke nothing except with his sharp, shrewd old eyes.

Howland said, "Mr. Falter, I'd like a couple of pack mules and a good riding horse that's used to the rough country for Mrs. Murchison here, and some riding clothes for her. Can you fix us up? And an extra horse for her, too, if you have it."

Falter grunted. "For when?"

"For right now. We're pulling out with the train in the morning. Anders say he'll leave at five sharp."

Falter grunted again. "Then he'll have to winter his mules in the north. It's weatherin' up. He'll not get back down here till spring with a wagon."

"Maybe you're right," Howland agreed.

The old man looked appreciatively up and down Aurora's figure, but he had lived in the West long enough to learn to polish his nose on his own grindstone and he asked no questions.

"I'll fix you up," he agreed.

Howland finally selected two mules and then he tried a few horses, but found only one that would do. Ordering the animals sent up to the livery, Howland selected grub then, and slinging the heavy sack over his shoulder and with Aurora carrying her own packages, they headed through the sharp dusk wind back to the tavern.

"But I still don't like for you to break your trip just on my account," she told him. "By what that man said, once you get back north you'll be there for the winter. And if you came down here specially for—specially to find a woman, that's a long time to wait."

Howland took a deep breath. "Well, yes," he agreed. "But I was doing it in spite. Somehow my feelings have cleared till I can see I'm not fool enough to hitch myself with another female."

The lie he had told her about Murchison—or rather the parcel of them—troubled him as he turned in for the night. Not his conscience, but his spirit. For it might be hard, later on when Aurora found out the truth, to make her see that he was taking the only course that he could take, and then she would despise him. But, for that matter, it would make little difference, for if she should patch things up with Murchison, she and Howland wouldn't be seeing each other, anyway. The important thing was to get Trilby back if she was ready to come back.

Obviously, since Mrs. Anders had said the two were going to live at Salt Lake, Murchison had planned to have a home there and another at the northern mines so he could have the comfort of a woman at either place. And just as obviously, he didn't plan to let either of them know what he was doing, for neither was the kind of woman to share

a man, and Murchison couldn't help knowing that.

No, the best thing was just to get the three of them together, and go on from there with everything settled once and for all, and if Aurora decided to step out of the picture she could go on to Seattle where her Cousin Julie lived, which would save her the embarrassment of returning to Missouri. For in Seattle, a hundred wealthy and worthy men would offer her their hands within a week.

He blew out the candle—whale oil and the evil-smelling, new-fangled kerosene were too dear except for special occasions—and crawled into bed. It was late when he finally slept, and in the next room, six inches from his hand, Aurora's bed occasionally jiggled against the wall as she turned restlessly.

THEY had been on the road a full hour when the sun rose hazily. Howland saw Anders smelling the weather, but if the man could foresee anything drastic he didn't let on, though it could ruin him to have to abandon his wagons if the roads snowed up on him on the way back. The Cheyennes, who hated the gold-seekers, now that the ancient truces of the trappers had been broken, wouldn't leave much to be found in the spring, and anything they missed would be taken by whites. It was early for snow, but a rain could slow the wagons, heavily loaded as they would be on the way back, until an early squall could catch them.

Anders would be glum for a day or two at leaving his wife, but Howland wasn't bothered at his shortness of speech. He had Aurora to talk to. She was a surprisingly good rider. The first day, veiled against the wind and the sun that became hot by noon, she gaily refused to admit she had ever been on a horse before. But that night, as they ate, she confessed she had belonged to a bridle club and had ridden several times a week for four or five years.

The men, as a prank, had made a circular park of the wagons and they talked gravely of Cheyennes and other tribes and scalping parties, but Howland tipped Aurora a wink as he fixed her bedroll under one of the wagons where the heavy dew would not reach her.

"Only thing you'll have to worry about is finding a rattler crawled in with you to get warm," he told her.

In the distance, something let out a crazy, blood freezing sound and chewed it into small pieces.

"Indians?" she asked unsteadily.

"Coyote," Howland said.

She asked, "Will you sleep near me?"

"Right here." He would have liked being under a wagon, too, but he threw his roll down upon the ground near the wheels and hung a tarpaulin to give her a little privacy.

They washed their clothes, three days later, in a fresh-water creek when they left the alkali country for good, and drove on next morning with the still-damp garments hanging from the bare wagon bows. They nighted at the sawmill at War Cry and next morning, by fire-light, Howland and Aurora finished taking the things from her boxes and making them into packs for the mules, for they were leaving the train here.

He knew now that he must tell her about Murchison and Trilby before they went much farther so that she could decide whether she wanted to go to the Gulch and face him, or to handle the matter otherwise. It was the only fair thing to do, and, much as he dreaded telling her, and ashamed as he was at the prospect of having to explain that he had lied to her, he knew that he must do it. But not until they were alone.

They left War Cry at early daylight. Weary now from her long journey and obviously sore from the constant riding—though she had rested in the hay in the wagons much of the time—Aurora was becoming silent and preoccupied. By steady riding they could be at the fork at noon where they must decide whether to go to the Gulch or to Lewiston. So at noon he must tell her. And beyond the telling, he didn't let his mind run.

A sprinkle in the night had settled the dust so that they could ride without fear of sending up a plume. The country was far too rough for them to be seen at any distance, but by the same token they couldn't see anyone who might be stalking them. Not that Howland was worried about an ambush. There were no miners down this way and such a small amount of travel that outlaws were accordingly scarce. Nor was he traveling by trail, but by rule of thumb. The worst risk was to bump into a party of Cheyennes on the prod. It didn't take much whiskey to make them forget the consequences that could follow the taking of a white girl.

The sun had come out redly and before it was well up it had hazed over and clouds that looked like snowheads were piling up on the horizon. The pack mules and the two led horses—one of which he had bought at War Cry—were getting cranky and holding back, and to make matters worse a cold, mean drizzle set in about nine.

CHAPTER FIVE

Campfire Palaver

IT WAS not until he untied the slicker that had been tied behind the cantle of the saddle he got for Aurora—a man's saddle,

for she wore a divided skirt and rode astride, as was sensible—that he discovered it was useless as far as rain was concerned. It must have been tied there for years, hanging on the little saddle which had been gathering dust no telling how long, because of its size, in Falter's back room.

They had stopped in the lee of a bluff, and, shielded by it, Howland rigged himself out in a Navajo blanket—which would turn water, as far as it went—after he forced his slicker upon the rueful and reluctant girl. He fastened up his bedroll and put it back on the mule and swiftly hitched it down. Ordinarily he could have laughed at being rigged out like an Arizona squaw, but it was hard enough to conjure up a grin, even now, the way his mind was weighed down as he clambered into the damp saddle.

He had abandoned the lead rope, and now Aurora led the way again. The four animals followed her and he brought up the rear, speaking to her now and then about the way to turn.

His right arm was wet from the elbow down, and his legs and feet were wet so that he was chilled through when they stopped at noon under the brow of a towering brown bluff and gathered dry leaves to start a fire of dead cedar from the brake through which they had been riding for an hour. Ordinarily, in weather like this, he would have pushed on, but now the time had come that he had to talk to her so they could decide which road to take and what they must do. His own feelings about Trilby he would swallow. The decision must be Aurora's, and it must be made with no advice from him.

Coughing from the fumes of one of his scant horde of spit-devil matches, he got the fire going with the dry stuff he pawed out of a drift of brush against the twelve-hundred foot cliff. By the time the blaze climbed pungently through the wood, crackling and spitting as a cedar knot caught, Aurora had the grub off the mule and the skillet and coffee pot out. The browse was scant so, while she cooked, Howland gave the animals the last of the grain along the warm creek which had its source in the steaming springs over on the Mulehides.

He came back to the fire, then, and took off the wet blanket and stood with his pants legs steaming in the smokeless heat. But he was cold. Cold inside, and aches shot through his bones, and the frying rancid salt meat, which he had come to actually like in four years of eating it, didn't smell good to him. Nor even the coffee.

Aurora shot him a quick, worried look as she knelt by the too-hot skillet, and he took care to brighten up when her glance came to his, more casually, next time.

Finally they ate the meat with cold bread, and at last she broke the silence. She said, "We'll make it to the Gulch tonight?"

Shivering a bit, he said, "Sure."

"But you don't want to go there?"

He shot her a startled look. "Why?"

"How would I know?"

"I mean, why do you say that?"

"I don't know. From the way you act, or the tone of your voice, or something. If it's something you have on your mind . . . Well, I keep having a feeling that you're starting to tell me something, and then not doing it. Look, Sam. I'm a big girl." She hushed, coloring a bit. "But if it's something it would be better not to discuss. . . ."

Always irritated by a woman's so-called intuition, which he generally found to be wrong, Howland drawled, "If you mean, have I fallen in love with you and have I been trying to bring it up . . ." He was going to say, "You're wrong," but his tone did that.

Subdued, she said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to flatter myself that you—but the way you look at me sometimes." She looked directly at him. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. But I like you so very much and I was so glad to see you there at Soda Tanks that I thought if there was something you wanted to talk over with someone you could surely feel free to talk to me."

Something in her voice, or her gesture, or perhaps the tilt of her head, reminded him all at once of Trilby. He got to his feet.

Aurora said, "It's about her?"

This was the time. This was the opening he needed to explain about Trilby and Murchison. His lips were dry—from fever, he realized vaguely, and he wet them with his tongue and started to speak. And then, against the green-black of the cedars, he saw that the drizzle had turned to snow, and for a second his blood stopped running. Already, as he watched, it was thicker.

HE SAID, "Take off that slicker so as not to scare the stock. Walk out there with me, just as if we're catching them to go on. If they get away, it'll be tough for us."

Unhooking the buckles, she said, "But why should they?"

Howland shrugged. "How should I know? Mules are hard to catch when it's snowing and if they start playing tag the horses will run, too, and if they all start running we'll lose our bedrolls and those packs."

The temperature had fallen a dozen degrees, he realized, as he moved out toward the twisting cedars where the wind would hit him. The old mule he had been riding was the steadiest of the entire string, he thought. And as they walked along, heads ducked over to their shoulders to keep the snow out

of their necks, Howland said, "Now, I'll take Geronimo. You try for your saddle horse, and keep entirely away from the pack mules."

Aurora said, "This—this is going to be a bad storm?"

Everyone had read of the horrors of the mountain winters—of snow-bound parties murdering and eating their members, and all the rest. He cursed himself for a thoughtless fool for getting the girl into this, even though it was far too early for a reasonable man to think of snow.

He shrugged. "They say early snow lasts long—whoa, boy." He caught the big mule by the forelock and quietly, as he forced the bits between reluctant teeth, he said, "Stand still," to the girl. "I can round the others when I'm on him."

Abruptly, one of the pack mules bucked and whirled, kicking up his heels, and Geronimo jerked free, leaving the bridle in Howland's hand, and then the drove was away. Howland drew his pistol and aimed at arm's length and fired three quick shots and one of the pack mules fell in a kicking heap and Howland ran through the creek, water flying high, with the bridle. He had it on the animal and the throat-latch buckled before it wobbled to its feet, and giving it no chance to recover enough to fight him, he caught it by the lower jaw and led it staggeringly back through the water.

"Bring the rope that was on the grub pack!" he shouted at Aurora, and she turned and ran toward the bluff which showed ahead like an ominous cloud that had settled to earth.

They got the mule safely to camp. The shot, just across the top of his neck, had been perfect. An inch higher, it would have been a miss. An inch lower, the mule would have been dead. As it was, he had saved her bedroll and a couple of her packs of stuff—and something to ride.

Panting, he said, "Now here's how it is: In two hours or maybe three, it will be dark. We can spend that time making a shelter here and getting up wood. We've got a hatchet in the cook box and a mule that'll be able to drag poles in another ten minutes. Or we can take a chance on reaching an old cabin over on the Sausolito Trail. Four miles, but it'll seem like four hundred. Once we get there, we'd have a better chance—but we might not make it. We can make out here if the wind doesn't change and pile the snow up."

Aurora said, "You think the cabin would be better?"

Suddenly the snow was so thick there was no choice.

"I think we'd better get to work," he told her.

THE girl worked like a Trojan, peeled down to a light jacket to keep from working up a sweat that might be fatal. Back and forth she led the mule with the cedar poles lashes to the collar Howland had rigged, and by the time he had more ready she had the last ones tied in place on the shelter walls with long strings of bark he showed her how to jerk off, and was back with the mule. They had built a smudge and worked downwind from it so the smoke could be followed the hundred steps back to it through the blinding snow. It was getting darker, but it made no difference. Howland could but little more than see the hatchet with which he chopped and hacked.

Now back again, her hands bleeding in a dozen places, she shouted, "I think you've got enough!"

He was really worried now as he got to his feet and caught up a load of limbs and went to see. They had built the hut where a jut of the cliff came out and made a right angle shoulder. If snow drifted against one angle, it almost certainly wouldn't against the other, and if the hut were buried it would be a matter of only six or eight feet to dig out. Otherwise, their bones might not be found until a hundred feet of snow melted next March.

She had built well. He could hardly believe it. And she had also evidently dragged up dead wood each trip the mule made, and piled it for fuel. He shouted, "Fine! I'll start thatching. Get in there and warm up!"

She yelled back, "How do you thatch?"

"All we can do is pile on limbs and weight them with rocks." he cried.

He started laying them on the outward slant of the hut to stop the snow that floated in. And in his ear she said, "I can do that! Hadn't you better get more wood?"

She went with him, and with the mule they made a travois with poles that could be chopped up for burning and loaded it with limbs for bed and thatching. The second trip Howland had to get down and feel along the snow they had roughened on their previous trips to find the way back. That so sobered him that they didn't go again. . . .

Tomorrow morning, he knew, as he sat shaking by the fire in the hut, he would have to shoot the mule, partly for food and partly to keep it from starving and freezing. If they could keep full of solid food for a few days till this blew out, he could rig snowshoes and they could mush out.

His feet were warming a little now, wrapped in a shawl from Aurora's pack that they had saved, and his shoes and socks and the ends of his pants legs were steaming dry by the fire that fought the chill back. But a terrible cold was in his marrow and a

heavy, dead feeling in his heart as he took the coffee, but little more than hot water it was, which Aurora handed him.

Her eyes were troubled in the firelight. She said, "You're sick."

"Not really," he told her. "It's just that I haven't slept right the last couple of months. But I'm still pretty tough."

He did feel better after he drank the coffee. But he still had the heavy feeling that something was going to happen, a feeling which had warned him before. Like the time when he refused to sign onto the *Kingfisher* as pilot, and her boilers blew thirty minutes later as she backed off the St. Louis wharf. And the time he quit work at noon on a placer that was making him and six others a hundred dollars an hour apiece, and an avalanche buried it—and them. Not that he always had a warning. He had had none whatever when Trilby ran off with Murchison.

The hot drink was warming him inside, now, and he relaxed against the wood which made a backrest to the couch of cedar twigs over which he had spread Aurora's bedroll.

A dozen emotions revolved within him now. Shame that he had not told her the truth from the first, and fear that he was not going to get her out of this, and loathing for himself over the whole thing.

They sat there eating, she a little nearer the fire than he, the way he was leaning back, and he liked to watch the play of the light on her cheek and eye and nose and hair and on the swell of her breast.

A flake of snow sizzled in the fire as the wind eddied a bit, and he saw that the girl was cold. To build a big enough fire to really warm the drafty place would eat up the wood and dry out the thatching overhead and send up such a blaze that the low hut might catch fire. He said, "You'll be warmer, as soon as you finish eating, if you turn in."

She said, matter of factly, in something that sounded like a speech she had planned, "We'd as well be sensible about this. If it were your blankets we'd saved, I'd certainly hope. . . ." She floundered to a halt.

Grateful, Howland said, "Well, we could fix the tarp off your pack on these boughs and . . . like this. . . ."

He gulped down the rest of his grub and presently he had fixed the canvas and opened out the canvas that covered the bedroll, top and bottom. The wily old storekeeper, with an eye to business, had put in the best wool blankets and plenty of them and presently they were snugly fixed, sitting there on the improvised couch with their shoulders well wrapped where the top of the blankets came up behind them, and the rest over them for a lap robe.

CHAPTER SIX

Mountain Castaways

HE FELT better yet, now, for he had not been dressed for this weather when it broke, and his heavy clothing had gone with his bedroll so that he had lost everything except his saddle, guns and grub box.

With a final little chattering of her teeth, Aurora settled back against the pile of wood and boughs behind them, and Howland said, "You make a swell pioneer! I never saw anything to equal it."

She shot him a sidelong look and a little stiffly he added, "I never bother to flatter people unless it's some damned fool that needs a little puffing up."

Something almost like a short, rueful chuckle escaped her. "The way I feel, I could stand a little."

She looked at him again, and it was in that second that it came to him that the months of misery he had gone through, and the storm itself as far as he was concerned, were worthwhile because they had brought him to this moment. And there could be no greater irony in the situation, granting that they got out alive. He had to fall in love with the wife—the wife faithful and loving enough to go through what Aurora was going through just to get to her man—or his worst enemy. Or of his best friend. For if Murchison hadn't stolen Trilby from him, he might never have known this feeling that was beating through him now. Yet, since he couldn't speak about it, since he was helpless to do anything, it would have been better, he guessed, had it never happened.

Sitting very still, not looking at him, she said, "What can we do about it, Sam? We're honorable people. Could you stand it, the rest of your life, for folks to say, 'That's Sam Howland. He married a divorced woman?' And we've got to consider John's side of it."

He said, "You, too? How did you know I—"

"I knew you were the kind of man who'd feel he couldn't speak. I swallowed my pride because—" She took a deep breath. "It's not as if John and I were *really* married. I told you I was ill. Too ill to travel. He had to bring supplies to the Army and he had to leave. The doctor let him and the preacher come in long enough for the ceremony. Do you see what I'm trying to tell you?"

He wanted to touch her hand, to take her in his arms. He said, "Lord, I'm glad." And he gathered her in, but he didn't kiss her. It was enough to hold her.

She said, "Will we get out alive?"

He exclaimed exultantly, "How could we

help it? How in hell could we help it?"

Decorously, except for her head on his shoulder, she kept her distance until she was asleep. But now, in the midst of her gentle breathing, she snuggled against him for warmth, and more and more, as he half reclined, staring into the fire, his heart was filled to bursting. He would get her out of this. Maybe not until spring, if the passes filled with snow, but he could bring in enough red meat to keep them going. He had more than seventy cartridges for his Henries, besides his pistol shells, and deer no doubt came to the warm creek to drink. Probably had a park somewhere along it, beyond the cedars where there was browse. And he could set traps.

She half turned in her sleep and put her arm across him. Gently he kissed her hand, as it came against the rough stubble of his chin, and fixed the cover about it. . . .

He awakened with a start, stiff and cold, to a shaft of bright sunlight streaming through a chink into his eyes. The fire he had fixed at midnight was smouldering.

Aurora's fingers, he realized suddenly, were pressed upon his lips, and in his ear she breathed, "Sh-h-h. . . ."

Outside a man growled, "How the hell do I know how a mule come to be here? We'd better get him if we don't want to get what Dutch and Plummer and the rest of them got. We've left a trail a mile wide in the snow."

Another said, "Lord, let's kill him and take a chunk of the meat. I haven't had a bite since noon yesterday."

And a third man exclaimed, "Eat your own horse. We need that mule for relief. Easy now! Don't spook him."

The second one said, "Wait a minute! Ain't that a lean-to snowed under there against the bluff?"

Quietly Howland got his feet into his frozen shoes and tied the laces. Except that the lean-to was never intended to turn lead, he would handle things from in here. He whispered, "I'll get rid of them. Hide under the bedroll."

He tumbled it over her with a careless effect, and trying to keep from shivering in the biting air, he kicked aside the limbs that blocked the low doorway, shoved away the light drift of snow outside and stuck his head out to face the three guns he expected to see.

THREE men had got off their fagged horses which stood, heads down, steam frosted heavily along their muzzles and shoulders where it blew back from their widened nostrils. The men peered narrowly from the frost-rimmed scarves they had wrapped about their ears and faces.

One said, "Kill the son, Frank. I've just got two shells left in this gun and I'm too cold to reload."

The smallest of the men said, "My God, it's Sam Howland."

Howland got carefully to his feet and dusted the snow off his knees. He nodded at the little man. "Howdy, Manners," he said. "Looks like you're in bad company again." He hushed, staring beyond them at the man slumped, without a saddle, on a winded black horse.

His mittened hands were tangled in the animal's mane and pink frothy slobbers were frozen about his mouth and on the horse's withers. It was John Murchison.

Faintly, Murchison said, "I'll watch the back-trail, boys. I've got my rifle trained on them." He straightened, abruptly seeming to come out of a sort of coma. He looked wildly about for a few seconds, then sagged again. Lucidly, now, he said, "The others? Hung?"

The biggest of the three men on the ground —the one called Frank—spoke brutally. "Plummer and thirteen others. They hung even the ones that would have died from shots. I told you a month ago people had stood for all they meant to."

Murchison straightened again. His face was obviously frost-bitten. Except for the horse and the pistol holster he wore, and from his general size, Howland would not have known him. He stared at Howland with no surprise.

He wheezed, "My luck's run, Howland." Laboriously he got a hand into his coat pocket

THE JOB AHEAD . . .

SERVING

in peace as in war,
in the quiet of the hospital,
in the fury of the hurricane,
the veteran at home,
the troops overseas.

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and drew out a pouch and tried to toss it, but it slipped from his fingers and disappeared in the soft snow with a chinking sound. "She—left me for a lousy low-down—tinhorn," he croaked. "Sometime—when she's down on her luck—give her that—will you?" He shook with a racking cough and blood ran down his chin. He spat. "And write me a letter, will you, Howland—address—in my—wallet—girl in—St. Louis. Tell her what a lousy—I was. But I—" He opened his mouth convulsively. "Look out!"

Howland had been watching the men, but for a split second his eyes had wavered. He jumped aside, drawing, but before Frank's gun could fire the little man named Manners had shot, and the racking bark of a Henry spat out there at Howland's right. Frank slumped to his knees, turning half around, and fired deliberately at Murchison and furrowed the horse's rump. The animal bolted and went out of sight around the bluff with Murchison hanging on.

Frank got up, walked drunkenly down toward the creek as Howland watched the other big desperado, and, as if he had deliberately planned it, pitched headlong into the warm water. The sharp click of skim ice at the edge tinkled across the still distance.

The smoke of the rifle Aurora had fired through a chink drifted lazily past Howland.

Howland said to Manners, "Get on that mule and clear out."

George, the big man who had first told Frank to shoot Howland, said, "If you keep me here, you'll be caught in the middle of a fight when the showdown comes."

"Won't be much of a fight," Howland told him. "You won't have a gun. Take it away from him, Manners."

Manners still held the drawn pistol, but George had raised his own clumsily in his cold hand, and the two stood there staring each other down. Howland drew his own. Manners said pleadingly, "He's a friend of mine, Sam. I can't go against him."

More snowheads were piling up. Howland suspected that the vigilantes would have had enough by now. That their thirst for vengeance might be satisfied, and that the thirst of the outlaw bands for trouble might be quenched. Yet, if he let this man go armed, and the vigilantes did corner him. . . .

With unbelievable speed, George raised his left hand and fanned his gunhammer with the edge of it. Manners fell. Howland fired twice and George sprawled down across the twitching body of Manners and lay still.

Sweat breaking on him, Howland started to drag Manners free, and then he saw that he was dead, shot cleanly through the neck and spine at the base of his skull by George's bullet. Howland let the dead man lie.

He turned to go back to the girl. She had come out, holding the rifle. She looked at him, trying to speak, and then the words came out: "Are you all right?"

"Not a scratch," he told her tautly. "Thanks to you. But you better go in till I move these bodies."

The black horse was coming back, riderless. Howland reached into the lean-to and dragged out a blanket.

"There's no need," he said, "but I'll go see about that fellow."

"It was John?"

He nodded. She reached into the shanty and brought out another blanket and he made no attempt to dissuade her as she slogged along by him.

They found Murchison dead in the snow, and for a long time she stood there looking down at him. Her eyes were wet then as she raised them to Howland.

"He was the one—he and Trilby?"

Howland said, "Yes. He was the one. I didn't know he was married to you. I came back from Seattle and found out what had happened and I followed them down and made him marry her."

"I knew something was wrong, the way he didn't want me to come out here. He—he wasn't really expecting me."

Howland said, "Then you must have thought it odd when I said I knew of course you were coming, and he wanted me to bring you up."

In the distance, now, he heard the faint beat of many hoofs. And he saw, with the excitement passing, that Aurora was cold. But she said, "A little odd. . . ."

"Vigilantes coming," he told her, and turned away.

With a final look at Murchison as Howland knelt and put the hat over his face, she turned away. The hoofbeats were drawing ever nearer.

"We'd better get a fire. At least heat them some water to drink," Aurora said, staring at Howland.

She stumbled in the deep snow and Howland picked her up and carried her toward the hut.

The snowheads he had seen were not rising, but falling. They were gone completely now and a suddenly warm wind was upon his face. A chinook. Aurora looked at him in surprise, as if doubting her senses, but she didn't speak.

"Squaw winter," he said. "Snow'll be gone by night."

That was a good sign. A good sign, he felt, of the years ahead. For the country and for Aurora and himself.

THE END

★ The Branding Corral ★

Conducted by Strawboss

NEXT year the State of California plans several celebrations marking the hundredth anniversary of the discovery of gold. Without question the year 1848 was a memorable one, for it signaled the inauguration of a fabulous new era in the Western history of the nation. To lead off this month's *Branding Corral,* we quote Joel Purdy, of Provo, Utah, a former sailor, whose great-grandfather settled on the Pacific Coast in the early days. Joel's mania is collecting information on the men who helped build California. All set, Mr. P!

Dear Strawboss:

If John Wilson Marshall had listened to what his friends and fellow workers had to say, the gigantic California gold strike of 1848 might never have been made. But Marshall, termed by many an unstable, erratic fellow, was stubborn, as well, and when he got an idea he usually stuck with it and worked on it to the end, come hell or high water.

Marshall, a crackerjack craftsman and millwright, was born in New Jersey and arrived at John A. Sutter's fort, at the confluence of the American and Sacramento Rivers, from Oregon, in July of 1845. He was a member of what was known as the McMahon-Clyde immigrant party. The fort had been built by Sutter, with the help of Indians, when the former had arrived from Yerba Buena in 1839, and had gradually been added to.

Sutter, who had visions even at that early date, of a Pacific Republic, and who wished to make himself head of the agricultural domain he was building on the present site of Sacramento, knew that to control a sawmill meant domination of his little immigrant kingdom. Marshall it was who found for Sutter a sawmill site, fifty miles up the American River from the fort, on the south fork.

Many thought Marshall crazy for even suggesting the sawmill site. John Bidwell, a great friend of Sutter's, went on record as flatly opposing the proposition. How any sane man, Bidwell told Sutter, could dream of rafting sawed lumber down the American River canyons, was impossible for him to conceive.

Another impediment to the construction of the sawmill was the lack of competent carpenters and other craftsmen. This problem, however, was solved in August, 1847, when one hundred and fifty Mormons, on their way to Great Salt Lake in Utah, stopped and remained at Sutter's Fort at the command of their high priest at Salt Lake. It appeared that food was scarce in Utah and the Saints there would find it tough sledding to feed any more mouths. Among the Mormons at the fort were many highly-skilled mechanics.

The arrival of the Mormons cast the die for Sutter and Marshall. Exactly one day following the arrival of the Saints, Sutter contracted the Jersey millwright to build the sawmill. Marshall immediately left to start construction.

A cold, driving rain hammered Sutter's Fort all during the day of January 28, 1848. Out of the deluge rode John Wilson Marshall, drenched to the skin and breathing hard from a terrible ride of fifty miles. His buckskins were soggy, he was plastered with red gumbo mud from head to toe. He was hardly able to speak.

Sutter didn't know what to think except that, as many people had often charged, Marshall was insane. The millwright had been at the fort only two weeks before, supervising the transportation to the mill site of equipment necessary for the mill's construction. The day before, Sutter knew, a wagon of provisions had been sent by him, personally, to the mill.

Marshall shouted to Sutter that he must see him alone—immediately. Locked in a room, Marshall, his face white and twitching, drew from his stained and dripping buckskins a rag in which was wrapped a yellowish substance.

"I believe," said Marshall, "that this is gold."

It was.

The millwright had made his discovery on January 24. The mill had been tested and it was found that the tailrace wasn't deep enough at the lower end. Water moved up against gravel bars, washed back against the flutter wheel and checked its turning. Marshall and his Mormon workmen tried to deepen the channel. They dug up the channel bed and removed blasted rock. They opened the flood gates at night to allow the water to wash out the gravel and sand.

Marshall, on January 23, working with a tin plate, washed sand from the bottom of

(Please turn to page 130)

BIG MUDDY FREEZE-OUT!

Missouri River Pirate Novel

By William Heuman

CHAPTER ONE

Moon of the Big Freeze

ALL through that hot August morning Captain Brant MacLean stood at the wheel in the pilot house of the Missouri River packet *Judy Greene*, watching the swirling brown water in front of him and the Sioux smoke signals off on the bluffs to the west. Once he'd seen a small cloud of dust moving along the base of a distant hill as the sternwheeler slid around the base of Rebel Moun-

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He broke the bottle across the giant's huge skull.

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tain and came into open country again; a country of rolling plains sparsely dotted with clumps of trees.

Mate Ed Ferguson came into the pilot house, closing the door behind him, and stood before one of the windows, looking out, a frown on his narrow, clean-shaven face.

Ferguson said finally, "Damn it, Brant. They're going to hit at us."

"Where?" MacLean asked softly, gray eyes still on the water. They were skirting timber on the left bank now, moving between Hat Island and the shore line, with only five feet of water beneath the boards. The *Judy Greene*, Brant MacLean was thinking, fully loaded with two hundred and fifty tons of mining machinery and grocery staples, had a draught of twenty-six inches, which made this "deep water."

"Where?" Ferguson muttered. "You tell me, Brant. You can have half my wages on this trip."

Brant turned the wheel slightly, missing by several feet a sawyer drifting downstream. He watched the green shore line and then the island. They had plenty room out here in the center of the stream, this channel being more than one hundred and fifty yards wide. At Twin Islands, eighteen miles up-stream, the Missouri channel narrowed to twenty-five yards, and there was a hundred-foot bluff on the east bank, looking straight down on the boat's deck. A man standing on top of this bluff could toss pebbles onto the deck of the *Judy Greene* as the packet slipped by.

Brant said quietly, "Get every man off the decks when we go through the channel at Twin Islands." They were past the tip of Hat Island now, and he swung the craft out into mid-stream. He called down through the speaking tube to the engine room, "Ease it up, George."

Standing at the wheel, he could feel the pressure of the current ease. The cups of the big sternwheel still dug doggedly into the brown water but the *Judy Greene* was not straining now as she had been going through the cannel where the currents were always much stronger.

"Twin Islands," Mate Ferguson growled, "and Red Bluff. We'll have our bit of hell going through there, Brant." He was a small man, but solid in the shoulders, coming only up to Brant MacLean's shoulder tops. Sand-colored hair protruded from beneath his Union Army forage cap. Ferguson had a pair of bright, steely blue eyes, divided by a sharp prow of a nose.

"You may issue the rifles," Brant said.

Ed Ferguson nodded. He was still watching the river, and Brant knew he was thinking of Twin Islands channel, and a horde of yelling Sioux up on the bluffs, concealed in the woods along the bank, sending a steady stream of lead onto the decks. It wouldn't be so good.

"Hell of a thing," Ferguson said slowly, "if we hit low water in that channel, Brant, and we stuck there."

"We'll have enough water," Brant told him. He was positive of that. He'd been watching the high water mark all along the river for a week now, and he could tell how far it had fallen, how much more it would fall before he reached Battle City, unloaded, took on his cargo of passengers anxious to get back to civilization before the Missouri became unnavigable, and started down-stream again.

Ferguson took out a cigar and lighted it after biting off the tip and spitting it out disgustedly.

"Last boat up the river," the mate scowled, "and last one down."

"And biggest profits," Brant smiled. "You know we need this money, Ed."

"We need our hair, too," Ferguson said, "and we'll be losing it one of these trips if we stick on a bar in low water and can't get off before the river freezes up."

BRANT MacLEAN grinned. He had a solid jaw and a straight, thin-lipped mouth. His nose was broken neatly across the bridge, and there was a long straight scar across his forehead where a Confederate bullet, smashing through the pilot house of the sidewheeler, *Andrew Jackson*, had creased him. He'd served with Foote and the famous Mississippi flotilla on the lower river during the war. He, along with hundreds of other rivermen, had contributed invaluable services to the Union cause, transporting men and equipment, foodstuffs, and munitions.

On the *Andrew Jackson* he'd been a river pilot at four hundred dollars a month. On the upper Missouri, making the run between St. Louis and Battle City, over fourteen hundred miles up-river, he had his own boat, and had had it for two years, netting nice profits since the overland Bozeman Trail had been closed by the government and all travel up to the Montana and Idaho gold fields had to be made by water.

He'd found the Judy Greene rotting at its berth in St. Louis, and he'd purchased the little packet for a song. He'd spent six months overhauling her, putting in new boilers. He'd borrowed money from St. Louis bankers to do this, but as he stood on the boards in the pilot house he had the feeling of ownership; he was master of his own boat; he could make his own decisions; could take the packet up the Missouri in October, if he wished, and there were no group of owners back in St. Louis to question his decisions.

"We have to clear five thousand dollars this trip," Brant said, "to pay the bank and give us complete possession of the boat."

Ed Ferguson snorted. "We'll make nearer ten," he stated, "if we get through. There'll

be two hundred passengers at Battle City with a quarter of a million dollars worth of dust, and every damned one of 'em will be ready to pay double the regular fare to get back to St. Louis so they can spend their money this winter." The mate glanced at MacLean out of the corner of his eyes. "A man could clean up by lifting the rates this late in summer. It's worth it, considering the risk we take."

"We'd clean up this year," Brant said, "and lose out next summer. The *Judy Greene* has a reputation on the Missouri. We'll keep it that way, Ed."

Ed Ferguson watched a thin column of smoke rising into the still air from the top of a bluff miles to the west. He said softly, as if thinking, "A quarter of a million dollars in gold dust, maybe even a half million, on one boat. That's a hell of a lot of money, Brant."

MacLean nodded. He's been watching the Sioux smoke signal, but now he glanced down toward the texas deck where a slim man in gray, with a gray beaver, was standing at the rail, also watching the smoke signals, a cigar in his mouth. He turned his head slightly, and Brant studied the man's thin, almost delicate features. The nose was straight, well-shaped, with a thin, black mustache beneath it. The man had long black burnsides, matching the almost womanish eyelashes. His mouth was small, thin-lipped, and his eyes were blue, in strange contrast to his sallow complexion. He had two red spots in his cheeks and quite often he coughed.

"Clay Hemsley," Ed Ferguson said quietly. "Looks to me like a gambler." He added, "A damned sick one, too. That cough comes from the lungs."

"Why would a gambler winter in Battle City," Brant asked, "when he can stay in St. Louis?"

Ferguson shook his head. "Money, luck, or women drive men like that. This winter there'll be a hundred times more money and more women in St. Louis. Maybe he's going up to Battle City for luck."

MacLean watched the river again, and then he saw Clay Hemsley pass down the ladder toward the main deck, hands in his pockets. Brant knew that he had seen the smoke signals and that he knew what they signified. There was little doubt in Brant's mind that the Sioux were going to attack his boat, the smallest one and the last up the river. Hemsley had heard the talk of the five other passengers aboard ship—five trappers taking supplies to Battle City, the end of the line, and then intending to move into the mountains for a winter's trapping. Hemsley, distinctly not a frontier man, seemed little perturbed by the Indian danger.

The night before they were to pull away from the St. Louis levee, ship's clerk, Ben Harvey, had stated that the *Judy Greene* had six passengers going up with them, five trappers, and Clay Hemsley. Ordinarily, Brant had found from experience, few men ascended the river near the end of the summer with the water low and the prospects of being stuck all winter on a sand bar and having to wait till the following spring when the river rose sufficiently to get them off.

Ed Ferguson said, "When do you expect to hit Twin Islands?"

"Three o'clock," Brant said. He had a clear stretch of water ahead of him and he knew that it would remain that way for another thirty minutes, at least. He stepped away from the wheel and Ferguson took his place. "Don't run it up among the trees," Brant grinned. Passing through the door he heard Ferguson's snort.

CHAPTER TWO

Ambush at Red Bluffs

HE TOOK a turn around the texas deck, stretching his legs, then went below to the main deck and the ship's bar for dinner. By being pilot as well as captain of the *Judy Greene* he saved four hundred dollars a month, the average pay of Missouri pilots. It was money he could ill afford to pay. The previous winter he'd had the entire engine overhauled and new decks installed on the *Judy Greene*. The stern wheel had needed repairs also, and all of this had cost money, but sitting down at one of the tables in the bar he realized it was worth it. The *Judy Greene* was a sturdy little craft, designed especially to navigate shallow waters, and he had no doubt that eventually she would pay for herself many times over.

Barkeeper Harry O'Keefe waved a fat hand to him and kept on polishing his glasses. He said quietly, "Damned Indians, Captain."

"We'll get past them," Brant said.

A waiter brought him dinner and he ate without haste, finishing with a cigar and a glass of O'Keefe's beer. He was sitting back in the chair, enjoying the cigar, when Clay Hemsley came in. He nodded to Brant and walked to the bar, taking off his spotless gray gloves.

Brant said, "Enjoying the trip, Mr. Hemsley?"

"Tolerably," Clay Hemsley nodded. He half turned, leaning against the bar, looking at Brant a dozen feet away. They were the only two men in the barroom with the exception of O'Keefe.

Hemsley said, "When do you expect to reach Battle City, Captain?"

Brant looked at the cigar. "Thursday afternoon."

Brant put the cigar back in his mouth and spoke around it. "Five days after," he said.

"We can't afford to linger this late in the summer."

Hemsley picked up the glass O'Keefe had set before him. He held it up to the light and said softly, "I should like to reserve passage for myself on your homeward trip, Captain."

Brant was unable to conceal his surprise. There had been no card playing aboard the *Judy Greene* since she had left St. Louis; there had been no entertainment whatsoever, and yet Hemsley wanted to return after remaining in Battle City only five days. It was a two-month round trip.

"See my clerk," Brant said. "I'm sure it can be arranged."

It was only after Hemsley had thanked him politely and gone out that he had the answer to Hemsley's request. If the man were a gambler he would undoubtedly wish to return on board the *Judy Greene* inasmuch as there would be at least two hundred miners returning, all loaded down with gold dust, and with a lot of time on their hands. A professional gambler could ask for nothing more than that.

At quarter of one Brant went up to the pilot house to relieve Ferguson. They were approaching Pawnee Point on the starboard, and Ferguson was giving the narrow neck of land jutting out into the river a wide berth. He had a sly grin on his face as he stepped from the wheel. Nodding toward the promontory he said, "What in hell do you make of that, Brant?"

MacLean saw the animal plainly at a distance of less than a hundred and fifty yards. It was a black horse with two white stockings, a beautiful animal, distinctly not a scrawny Indian pony. The horse was grazing in a small meadow in front of a stretch of timber. There was no saddle, no blanket on its back and no bridle.

"I'll lay ten dollars," Ferguson grinned, "that animal has 'U.S.' branded on its hip."

"Shall we take a look?" Brant smiled. He turned the sternwheeler deliberately in toward the bank.

Ed Ferguson watched, hands in his pockets, a grin on his face. "They'll skin you alive for this, Brant."

Brant kept the nose of the *Judy Greene* pointed toward the bank and the black horse. The animal lifted his head once, looked at them, and then went on grazing.

"An Injun horse would have been ten miles away from here by now," Ferguson said. "Wonder where they stole that animal." He added, "Damn 'em, they're licking their chops back in that timber."

Brant picked up the mouthpiece and called, "Pile it on, George."

Down in the engine room, Chief Engineer George Bender gave him full steam. The *Greene* plowed ahead, and then when they were twenty-five yards from the bank, Brant MacLean suddenly spun the wheel. The packet made a curve and swung away from the bank out into mid-stream again.

From the timber behind the black horse a large group of howling Indians sped down toward the river's edge, waving lances, shooting wildly at the retreating boat. Several of the shots banged harmlessly into the iron-clad walls of the pilot house.

Ed Ferguson was doubled up with laughter. Brant MacLean had been smiling also, but the smile left his face when he remembered Jackson Point, one hundred and twenty miles below, and the scarred skeleton of the light packet, *Western Star,* which had been enticed to the bank by a similar ruse the previous summer and its captain and crew massacred by a horde of Sioux bucks.

"They should think up something new," Ferguson said as he left the pilot house. "Don't they know they're bucking the smartest captain and pilot on the upper river?"

"Get out," Brant told him. He stood behind the wheel, watching the river, noticing the condition of the banks, the high-water marks here, the new channels, the cut-offs. The Missouri was a turbulent stream, never satisfied to run its course into the Mississippi calmly and quietly, but was always jumping from the original bed, finding a new, quicker way to reach the mother stream. The banks changed, the sand bars changed and shifted, disappearing here, rising some other place, and on no two voyages had Brant found the river exactly the same. It was a brown flood creeping over the land; it was a brown panther waiting to spring upon the unwary, ready to tear at thin hull boards with its sharp claws.

THEY passed Jordan's Creek and the big bar where the creek emptied into the Missouri; they passed Midland and then Halloway Island, small dots of green in the flowing brown tide. The channel was to the right of Midland and to the left of Halloway.

At quarter of three they rounded the bend at Roman Nose and came in sight of Twin Islands and Red Bluffs on the right bank. Ed Ferguson opened the door and came into the pilot room. Some of the deck hands were up on the texas, big Sharps' guns in their hands. They were watching the approaching bank on the right side.

Twin Islands, small, verdant, lay in the center of the river here with a fifty-foot channel between them. The packet channel lay on the right side of one island, between the island and Red Bluffs. The channel was thirty yards wide with deep water most of the time, but every packet making the passage had to go perilously close to the big bluff on that

right bank. It was a natural for ambush.

"See anything on top of the bluff?" Brant asked casually.

Ferguson had a glass in his hand and he looked through it for some time in silence. Watching the bluff intently, Brant could see nothing move.

Ferguson said quietly, "Big boulders piled up along the edge. We're in for it, Brant."

Brant pulled the bell cord to stop the boat. The packet slowed down out in mid-stream, a quarter of a mile from the two low-lying islands.

"If they're able to push one of those boulders on our deck," Ferguson said slowly, "it'll go right through. We'll sink in ten minutes."

Brant MacLean's lips were pressed tightly together. He studied the channel grimly, and then stared toward the islands with the fifty foot wide passageway between them. In early spring, with high water, a river boat had gone through this channel once, but it had been a harrowing experience, and the pilot of that particular boat had warned off all other experimenters.

"Not enough water there," Ed Ferguson said. "If we stick on a bar in that channel those red devils will cross to the islands and hem us in on both sides."

Brant smiled bitterly. "We can turn around and head back," he said, "but we won't." It had cost money to run up the river this far, money for cordwood, the crew payroll. There had to be a decent profit this trip or the *Judy Greene* went into the hands of receivers. Brant said softly, "Get every man under cover, Ed." He saw the gambler, Hemsley, strolling on the texas, a Colt gun in his hand, a cigar in his mouth. Hemsley walked like a man out for a breath of late afternoon air.

Ferguson grimaced, then said succinctly, "Your boat, Captain." He went out, and Brant rang the bell for steam.

The big sternwheel started to revolve again, the cups digging into the brown water. The *Judy Greene* moved ahead slowly at half speed. Brant MacLean turned the bow toward the islands and away from the regular channel. He saw Clay Hemsley glance up at him curiously. The deck hands were talking excitedly, looking toward the pilot house and then at the narrow strip of water between the two islands.

Black smoke gushed from the twin smokestacks of the packet as she surged ahead to the left of a small sandbar on the first island. Ed Ferguson was on the texas, ordering the men down into the hold as the passage between the islands was within gunshot range of the bluffs.

Brant stood flat-footed behind the wheel, holding the spokes lightly, watching the brown water ahead, watching every eddy, noticing the condition of the banks.

Glancing once toward the bluffs, he saw figures moving up among the line of big boulders which had been moved out to the edge of the cliff wall. A rifle cracked from the top of the bluff and the slug flattened itself against the wall of the pilot house.

They were in the channel now, one of the tall spars in the bow brushing the willows on the bank of the right island. Brant MacLean felt the sweat break out on his face. They moved slowly up the five-hundred-foot channel, and then the Sioux on the bluffs began to fire in earnest, spraying the decks, many of the shots bounding off the iron-clad walls of the pilot house.

Brant studied the river. Up ahead, on the right, there were ripples, indicating low water where the current was surging down over sand or rock. He turned the wheel slightly, holding his breath as the *Greene* veered against the left bank. Momentarily, he waited for that grinding jar which meant they were grounded.

The crew was firing back at the Indians now, firing from cover. Out of the corner of his eye Brant saw one buck throw up his hands and pitch forward off the bluff.

There were less shots from the bluff after that as the Sioux kept under cover, still yelling with rage as the packet continued on its way.

They were past the little bar, and then there was another. After that there were two huge boulders jutting out into the water, and the bow of the *Judy Greene* scraped one of these black rocks as it slid past.

At the other end of the channel the packet struck sand again. There was an ominous grinding sound, and the whole craft trembled, stood still for a long moment, then started to move again into deep water beyond the islands.

The Indians on the bank had started to howl gleefully when the boat stopped, but their glee turned to rage when the *Judy Greene* went over the bar and Brant MacLean called for full steam.

There were hard lines around Brant's mouth when Ferguson came in, white-faced, and sat down on the seat behind him.

The mate said slowly, "The money's not worth it, Brant."

MacLean relaxed then. He turned his head and grinned at Ed Ferguson.

"I'm going back on the lower river," Ferguson growled. "I'm going back to the Mississippi. Hell with this navigating a mud creek." He added thoughtfully, "Reckon you could run this rig on dry land if you had somebody to keep the hull damp."

"She's a good boat," Brant said, and there was affection in his voice.

Ferguson looked at his broad back for several moments in silence. He said then, "Man is supposed to love woman, not a damned contraption of wood and iron and fire which

runs on water." He got up and went out.

CHAPTER THREE

Army Renegade

THE *Judy Greene* slid up to the bank at Battle City at five o'clock in the afternoon with the sun a big red ball on the western plains. A mile down-river Brant had given the town his whistle and the banks were crowded as the packet snubbed in toward the shore and cast its tie ropes.

As the crew was throwing the planks from the packet to the log wharf Brant came out of the pilot house and went down the ladder toward the main deck. He met Clay Hemsley coming out of the bar.

Hemsley nodded. "Very pleasant voyage, Captain."

"Glad you enjoyed yourself," Brant said, "and kept your hair."

A faint smile slid across Hemsley's thin face. He coughed several times, holding his right glove across his mouth, and the red spots in his cheeks were accentuated.

"I presume," Hemsley stated, "there shall be no real danger on the way back with a large passenger list."

"Only danger," Brant agreed, "is from low water in the river. We'll have a hundred and fifty to two hundred men aboard. It'll have to be a big war party to stop us."

Hemsley nodded. "I'm looking forward to a pleasant and prosperous return voyage," he said, and walked away, puffing on his cigar, the high beaver perched slightly to one side.

A crowd of men had come aboard the moment the planks touched the wharf; already they were clamoring for tickets for the return passage. A line was forming in the bar, and boat's clerk Ben Harvey sat at a table, taking down names, lifting a hand so that he could hear above the noise.

Engineer George Bender came out of the engine room, face black from soot. He grinned at Brant, revealing a set of flashing white teeth. He said, "I could feel the sand through the hull when we went through Twin Islands, Captain."

"Nice work in there," Brant said. He slapped Bender's broad shoulder and he felt good inside. He had a nice crew: Bender, Ferguson, Harvey, and eighteen tough deck hands. He'd never seen a better crew aboard any river packet. He wanted to keep it that way.

Ferguson already had the roustabouts unloading ship. Kerosene flares were being set up along the wharf so that they could continue with the work after dark. Big freight wagons were hauled up close at hand, ready to move into the interior with the mining machinery and food. A lot of gear was aboard.

Langley Crane, editor of the Battle City *Herald* came aboard and shook Brant's hand. He said, "Have any trouble, MacLean?"

"Plenty Sioux down below," Brant admitted. "They're getting tougher every year." He invited Crane into the bar for a drink. Harry O'Keefe served them at one end of the little bar.

Crane said quietly, "Sioux aren't the only tough ones in this territory, MacLean."

Brant studied his glass. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"Battle City's filling up with toughs," Crane scowled. "They drift up here from St. Louis, looking for easy money. They come over the mountains from the Pacific Coast, or up the Colombia from Oregon, and they all head for the Montana gold fields. When they can't make anything in the fields and they're broke they head for Battle City, and so we have them."

"Killings?" Brant asked.

"Two men knifed a week ago," Crane said. "There's a robbery or two every night. Every miner in the territory is anxious to get the hell down to St. Louis before low water. They don't want to spend the winter here and lose every ounce they dug up this summer."

"Can't blame them," Brant nodded. "I think the *Judy Greene* can take back two hundred."

Langley Crane, a stolid, red-faced man with whiskers, looked at him steadily for some moments. "And their dust," he said quietly. "You think of that, MacLean?"

"I did," Brant admitted.

"Maybe a half million dollars worth," Crane half whispered. "The *Ezra Jones* pulled away from this town two weeks ago with over a million dollars worth of dust. Do you believe that?"

"Nice profits for the *Ezra Jones,*" Brant said.

"A big stake for anybody willing to take a crack at it," Crane muttered. "A half million dollars is a lot of money, MacLean, even in this country."

Brant looked at his glass. "Who would attack a river boat with two hundred and fifty odd men aboard? Not the Sioux?"

"The Sioux don't care about gold dust," Crane said. "I'm thinking of others."

"These toughs in town are unorganized," Brant observed.

"Need they be?" Crane wanted to know. "Suppose somebody came up here and got them all together? A half million dollars will draw a lot of bees—bees with stings, MacLean."

"I'll watch the bees," Brant grinned.

"Any way of checking your passenger list?" Crane asked him. "You could be taking aboard a bunch of them and you'd never know it."

Brant frowned at that. "When a man wants to buy a ticket," he said, "we can't refuse him. We know very few of the miners coming out of the fields."

"Another thing," Crane said suddenly. "Jack Flood is in town and he's boasting that he's going back on the *Judy Greene.*"

"Not while I'm captain," Brant said tersely.

FLOOD was a dishonorably discharged soldier from one of the army posts down the river. He was a giant of a man and a terror with his fists when under the influence of liquor. Once on an up-river trip Brant had had to put him off the boat for drunkenness and general misbehavior. Flood had been on a week's spree at that time and he was in no condition to fight back when the *Judy Greene* crew rushed him ashore at Fort Larrimore. Up and down the river Brant had heard stories of Flood's threats to bust up the captain of the *Greene* the next time they met.

"Flood is crooked and tough enough to organize these drifters in an attack on your boat," Crane said slowly. "Ever think of that?"

Brant shook his head. "He hasn't the brains. Flood could hold up a stage or slug a drunk in a back alley. He wouldn't know how to go about robbing a river packet."

"He's the leader of these Battle City toughs," Crane said. "I'd watch him if I were you." He said then, "When are you pulling out, MacLean?"

"Tuesday, seven o'clock in the morning," Brant told him. "You can print that."

When Langley Crane left, Brant walked out on the main deck and watched the roustabouts hustling boxes, crates and barrels ashore. It was not yet quite dark and he could see the long line of scraggly buildings forming Battle City's main street. The street was wide enough for an eight team or ox wagon to turn around in. There were three two-story buildings, the Battle City Hotel, the big Empire gambling house and John Maynard's warehouse at the far end of town.

Most of the buildings had false fronts with wooden awnings extending out over the board sidewalk as protection against the hot western sun. These houses formed an almost continuous line a quarter of a mile out on the open plains.

As Brant watched he saw the yellow lights beginning to flare up here and there along the main street. A bull outfit was just heading in from the west, empty wagons coming back from the gold fields, banging and bouncing in the ruts of the street.

Ed Ferguson came over and said quietly, "Jack Flood's down at the Empire. They say he's waiting for you."

"I'll accommodate him," Brent said. He took his pipe from his pocket, packed it and put it in his mouth.

Ferguson stared at him grimly. "Why bother with that damned riff-raff?" he asked. "You're a riverboat captain. He's a bum the army wouldn't have; he's a back-alley cutthroat."

MacLean shrugged. "An unwritten law," he smiled. "When a man asks for satisfaction he must have it."

"Your satisfaction," Ferguson said sourly, "might be a busted-in face and a few crushed ribs. Ever think of that?"

"It's not a pleasant thought," Brant grinned, "but custom is custom."

"Let him stay in the Empire," Ferguson advised, "and by midnight he'll be so drunk he won't be able to stand up, let alone fight anyone."

"So he'll be back tomorrow night," Brant said, "and every night that I'm in Battle City. He'll wait for my boat to come in next summer. We'll settle it now, and then Flood is satisfied."

Ben Harvey called to him as he was going off the boat. Harvey still had about twenty-five men lined up in front of him, booking passage. Harvey said, "Captain, there's a woman down at the hotel wants to go down-river this trip."

Brant frowned. "Why didn't she go earlier?" he asked. "Why didn't she go with the *Ezra Jones?* Everybody knows this last trip down-river is a bad one."

Harvey, a lean, angular man with a lantern jaw, lifted the pencil to his chin. "Thought you might like to tell her," he said. "One of the boys here passed it on to me. She came in last week from the Powder River country. Sioux wiped out her folks. She rode two hundred miles on a mule, bare-back, moving at night through Indian country. She has folks in St. Louis."

Ferguson whistled softly and looked at Brant. "She'll be as hard as iron," he said. "A big, tough girl."

"What's the name?" Brant asked.

"Dawn Faye," Harvey said.

Ferguson's grin broadened. "That's the kind of name they give the buxom ones," he chuckled.

"I'll see her," Brant promised. He crossed the gangplank and headed up the main street, the frown still on his face. He'd never liked women aboard ship, and accepted them only occasionally the first trip of the summer when water was high and there was little likelihood of sticking fast on a bar. In the case of Dawn Faye it was an emergency. He didn't blame a decent girl for not wanting to spend the winter in Battle City. He had Ed Ferguson's picture of her in mind when he entered Charlie Sanders' barber shop and had his

haircut, shave and a bath in the back room.

Sanders said to him, "Flood is talking big, Captain."

"I heard it," Brant nodded.

"I'll make it short on top?" Sanders offered. "Last week Jack Flood had a fellow by the hair and banged his head against the wall in the Empire until he was out."

"He won't touch my hair," Brant said. "Same as usual, Charlie."

HE LEFT the barber shop at eight o'clock and had his supper in the hotel dining room. He had to pass the Empire to reach the hotel and he looked through one of the windows as he went by. He didn't see the powerful Flood, but he knew Flood was inside, waiting. He grinned, thinking that it was a good thing to keep the big man waiting and drinking. Physically, he knew that he was no match for the giant. He weighed one hundred and ninety-five pounds himself, but Flood was fully two hundred and fifty, standing six feet four inches in his stockings. In the service at Fort Halsey he was supposed to have made himself an enviable reputation with his ponderous fists.

After eating a leisurely meal, Brant strolled to the desk and asked for Miss Faye's room. The clerk gave it to him: No. 11, on the second floor.

Going up the stairs he found himself hoping that she was as big as Ferguson had surmised and ugly as sin. One woman on board a river boat with some two hundred and fifty men could create some disturbance if she were pretty.

Brant walked down the narrow corridor on the second floor and stopped in front of Room 11. He knocked on the door and waited. He heard steps coming across the floor and then the door opened. He didn't like what he saw.

She was not big and she was not buxom and he felt himself wondering in amazement how this slip of a girl with chestnut brown hair had crossed two hundred miles of Indian-infested country on a mule. She was not beautiful, but she was good-looking. She had brown eyes to match the hair and a slender, delicate nose. Her face was tanned as if she'd spent a lot of time out-doors, and there were a few freckles around the nose. She was considerably younger than he had anticipated, and he was wondering why he had thought she would be older.

He said, "I'm Captain MacLean of the packet *Judy Greene*. I understand you want to book passage, Miss Faye."

"I would like very much to," the girl said, and the voice was low, sweet, quiet, and looking into her eyes more closely Brant MacLean suddenly remembered that she had just come through a small piece of hell on earth, and that she would carry terrible memories with her as long as she lived.

Brant groped around for the proper words. He said awkwardly, "Very sorry about your parents, Miss Faye. The Sioux are getting worse every year. I shall make every effort to get you to St. Louis."

She opened the door and stepped aside, nodding for him to come in. He went through the door and he left it open behind him. He thought he saw a small smile flit across her brown face. She closed the door and said, "I believe I can trust you, Captain MacLean. Your reputation had preceded you."

Brant stood with his hat in his hands, turning it around. Dawn Faye said, "My parents both died when I was a baby. I was living with an aunt and uncle when the Indians came."

Brant nodded. "It was unfortunate," he said. "You have people in St. Louis?"

"A cousin," Dawn said. "I hope that I shall be welcome."

Brant studied her face thoughtfully, and he saw the fears there, fears which this girl had repressed for days. She was afraid, but she was standing up.

"There is another thing," she said slowly. "I—I'm afraid I cannot pay my way, Captain MacLean. I have been living at the hotel on the charity of the management."

Brant waved a hand. "We'll find room for you," he said.

"I shall be glad to work my way," the girl told him, "if that is possible."

"We shall see," Brant smiled. "The *Judy Greene* leaves Tuesday morning at seven o'clock."

"I shall not be late," Dawn Faye said, "and I shall not forget your generosity, Captain."

Brant MacLean reddened in embarrassment. "We shall try to make it a pleasant voyage for you," he said, and then he thought of Langley Crane's warnings and forbodings. He went down the stairs, crossed the lobby, and out into the street.

Pausing in front of the Battle City Hotel, he looked up the street toward the Empire gambling house and he saw the excited crowd gathered there. He counted nearly a hundred men swarming on the walks and out in the gutter. Many were waving greenbacks and sacks of gold dust and he knew what was going on. Battle City was laying its bets on the Flood-MacLean fight. He realized then that this town had been waiting for weeks for him to come up-river, and during that time Jack Flood had been making his boasts.

Coolly, Brant lighted a cigar and strolled in the direction of the gambling house. The crowd saw him coming when he was still half a block away, and he listened to the cheer which went up.

Ed Ferguson was standing on the porch, long brown cigar in his mouth, hands in his pockets, frowning. George Bender, the engineer, was with him.

A man Brant had never seen in his life slapped his back and yelled in his ear,

"Give him hell, MacLean!"

He had to push his way through the crowd to the porch. As he went past Ferguson, the mate growled, "Why should you give these dogs a show?"

Brant only grinned at him. He saw the harassed Pete Samuels, owner of the Empire, coming through the batwing doors, hatless, a high flush on his sallow cheeks.

Samuels said quickly, "Brant take this thing outside. I don't want my place smashed."

"Too dark outside, Pete," Brant chuckled. "I'll stand all breakage."

"It's not good for the establishment," Samuels was saying. "This is an orderly house, Brant. We'll get a reputation."

"And you'll draw customers," Brant said. "Don't be a fool, Pete." He saw Clay Hemsley then, standing off to his left, watching him idly, no expression on his face. Then the faro dealer, Hal Wakefield, lifted a finger to him. Brant said, "What are they betting, Hal?"

"This crowd likes Jack Flood," the gambler smiled, "at two to one odds."

"Get me three hundred of it," Brant told him. "I'll settle with you later."

"Your money," Wakefield nodded.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood in the Empire

BRANT moved by Pete Samuels and through the batwing doors. He noticed that the inside of the saloon, the lower floor, was nearly empty, but that many men had already taken their seats on the carpeted stairs leading to the second floor. Others were crowded along the walls, and as Brant came in, the throng outside pushed in behind him, moving along the walls on either side.

The tables had all been pushed back against the walls and there was a clear space beneath the big cut-glass chandeliers—a space at least forty feet square.

Six bartenders stood behind Pete Samuels' ornate mahogany bar, all of them leaning over the wood on their elbows, looking toward the door. One customer stood at the bar, a tremendous figure of a man in a faded blue army jacket, the insignia stripped from it, and a small blue army forage cap perched on the top of his huge head.

Jack Flood was hunched over a glass of liquor on the bar. His head was down and he leaned over the bar, both powerful arms encircling the tiny glass as if it were a small god and he was paying homage to it.

The purple and green glass inlaid batwing doors made a tiny squeaking sound as they moved with the crowd coming in behind Brant. Unhesitatingly, Brant crossed the expanse of bar room, coming up behind Jack Flood. When he was still six feet away, the big ex-soldier started to come around. He had a brutal, whiskery face with a huge flattened nose and small, animal eyes, green colored. His hair was reddish, tousled under the small Union army cap.

Brant MacLean smiled. He said, "Hello, Flood," and then he slipped his own cap from his head in one quick movement and slashed it full in to Flood's face. "That what you were looking for, Jack?" he asked.

"It'll do," Flood grinned. He came away from the bar very fast for a man of his weight, big, hairy fists balled, and then he lunged his two hundred and fifty pounds in Brant's direction.

Brant had slipped toward the bar as he threw the cap, and when Flood rushed him he reached out with his right hand and scooped an empty liquor bottle from the bar. He leaped back nimbly, bottle in hand, and Flood's right fist, smashing in a downward direction like the chop of an axe, missed his jaw by a fraction of an inch. Flood stumbled forward awkwardly, off-balance.

With his left hand Brant slashed Flood's cap from his head, and then he broke the bottle across the giant's huge skull. The jagged neck of the bottle, continuing on its source, opened a six-inch cut along the right side of Flood's cheek, from the ear down to the neck. That side of his face turned crimson as he drpped to hands and knees.

Brant heard the roar of approval from the crowd. A man was yelling frantically, "Heel him, MacLean! Give him the boot!"

Flood came off the floor, still grinning, rushing forward like an ungainly bear. The quickness of his recovery caught Brant by surprise. He tried to elude the big man and he danced backward rapidly, but Flood caught up with him, grasped him around the waist and rushed him full into one of the tables at the far end of the room. Nearly five hundred pounds hit the table with smashing impact and it caved in, both men going to the floor.

Twisting desperately, Brant broke away from his man. He hit out with his fists and his boots as he scrambled away, and it was a boot heel smashing into Flood's mouth, pulverizing the lips, which enabled Brant to get off the floor.

From a sitting position Flood lunged forward, snatching at Brant's right ankle, seeking to drag him down again. The man's powerful fingers tightened around Brant's

ankle, digging in like steel claws, and Brant MacLean knew that if Flood once got him on the floor in a rough-and-tumble tilt he was finished.

Instead of trying to tear that foot loose, he put his weight down on it very suddenly and stepped forward, kicking out with his left foot. The tip of his hard boot caught Flood full on the chin, tumbling him across the smashed table again.

There was a stupid, bewildered expression on the giant's face as he righted himself, and Brant knew then that the fight was his. It would take time yet, the time it took a man to chop down a tough oak tree.

Jack Flood came to his feet and rushed again, but there was no nimbleness to him. The early, savage drive was gone. Brant stepped away from him and slashed at his battered face with his right fist. When Flood's head came up and his arms fell, Brant hit at him with both fists, short, jolting, snapping blows, packing his full hundred and ninety-five pounds behind each one.

The ex-soldier's head jerked from side to side as Brant drove him across the room toward the stair bannister. Flood tried to fight back, tried to hold his ground, but he was fighting against a buzz-saw now, and he was tired.

Flood stumbled away from the bannister, refusing to go down, hitting feebly back at his man. His face was unrecognizable now with the blood trickling from a half dozen smaller cuts, from the huge gash on his cheek, and from his battered mouth.

Brant hit him until he was arm-weary, and still Flood wouldn't go down. He stopped then, letting his arms fall to his sides. He looked at the giant, sagging in front of him, huge chest heaving, animal eyes blank. And then Jack Flood did a strange thing. He turned his back full on Brant and lurched toward the bar.

A big roar went up from the crowd at this signal of defeat. Brant followed his man to the bar, stood five feet away and lifted two fingers to the nearest bartender.

As the yelling crowd surged around him, he pushed one of the glasses down toward Jack Flood until it touched the big man's elbow. Flood was sagging over the bar, head down on his chest, blood dripping down on the wood. He turned his head slightly, looked down at the glass, and then, straightening himself with a terrific effort, turned and walked toward the door. He went out alone with the silent crowd watching him.

BRANT MACLEAN looked down at his battered hands. He had a few minor cuts on his face and a driving pain in the small of his back which had struck the rim of the table when Flood rushed him, but the hands had taken the worst punishment. They were beginning to swell up rapidly and he wondered if any bones had been broken. He could scarcely close them to pick up the glass of liquor in front of him.

Ed Ferguson pushed up beside him, looked at the hands, and said grimly, "So you had your circus. Now we'll go back to the boat and I'll send Doc Kramer down to look at your fists. You won't be able to hold a wheel for a week."

Pete Samuels came around the bar and stood in front of him, somewhat mollified. "I was glad to see that happen," Samuels smiled. "Flood has caused a lot of trouble in this place. Maybe he'll leave Battle City now."

"Send me a bill for that table, Pete," Brant said.

Samuels shook his head. "That'll be on the house," he said. "I won two hundred on you tonight."

Ed Ferguson took Brant's arm and led him away from the bar. The crowd was still yelling excitedly, and men slapped Brant's back as he made his way toward the doors.

Clay Hemsley stood just inside the doorway, a faint smile on his face. As Brant went by him, the gambler said softly, "I'd never stand up against you in a rough-and-tumble, my friend."

Brant smiled at him as he went out. Walking down the main street, Ed Ferguson said slowly, "So Jack Flood wouldn't drink with you, Brant."

"Flood didn't like to lose," Brant observed. "It's not a good thing in a man."

"He'll make a play to get back at you," Ferguson said. "I'd watch him."

They walked across the gangplank and Brant went to his cabin. He soaked the hands in warm water until Doc Kramer arrived and examined them. "No bones broken," the doctor scowled. "A man could break an arm on that Flood's skull."

Brant smiled as the physician bandaged the hands and then left. He said to the watching Ferguson, "I met with Dawn Faye." When Ferguson only looked at him he went on, "She'll have my cabin during this trip."

The mate opened his mouth. "So." he said.

"I'd rather she weren't coming," Brant said.

Ferguson's eyes widened. "That nice?" he asked.

"You'll see her," Brant said.

In the morning they had the *Judy Greene* unloaded and the roustabouts were taking on another cargo, mostly furs and buffalo robes taken by trappers in the Black Hills. Brant had a look at Ben Harvey's passenger list. He had two hundred and eight men going down-river with him.

Harvey said, "You want the men to work

on bunks down there on the main deck?"

"Put in as many as you can," Brant told him. "A lot of these boys will have to sleep on the deck in their blankets anyway."

"They're used to that," Harvey smiled. "They'll do anything to get down-river before the snow flies. Any man with gold dust on him will have it pretty tough in Battle City this winter."

The previous night, and that morning, Brant had taken notice of the many drifters in the town. He'd seen them in the saloons, lounging in the vicinity of the Empire gambling house, vicious-faced men, many with Indian blood in them. It was this crowd which always preyed on the miners in every field, and the Montana diggings had drawn them from every part of the country.

The ship's clerk watched Brant as he scanned the passenger list. He said then, "Be quite a bad business if the *Judy Greene* stuck on a bar a couple of days out of Battle City."

"She won't," Brant said.

"What if you're not at the wheel or in the pilot house?" Harvey asked him.

Brant put the list down. He said, "What does that mean, Ben?"

The thin clerk shook his head. "The *Judy Greene* is the only packet on the river can navigate in water as low as we'll have it on the way down. You're the only captain and pilot can take a boat down to St. Louis from Battle City. There's not another man in this town knows the river well enough even to attempt it."

"What else?"

"If anything should happen to you," Ben Harvey stated quietly, "the *Judy Greene* stays in Battle City till next spring, and a half million dollars worth of gold stays with it. You follow that?"

Brant MacLean rubbed his chin gently. "It's a point," he admitted.

"Walk easy," Harvey advised, "and watch every back alley from now till we move out."

"I'll be careful," Brant nodded. "I hadn't looked at it that way, Ben."

He went to his cabin after the talk with Harvey and took an Army Colt from one of the drawers and shoved it in his belt, buttoning his jacket over the coat. He had difficulty doing this because his hands were still bandaged almost down to the fingertips. He sat down then and loosened the bandages until his right hand was flexible enough to hold a gun.

He met Langley Crane on the street that morning and Crane said, "That was the damndest fight ever seen in this town, Brant. I'm glad Flood was finally whipped. It might tone him down a bit."

"We'll see," Brant said. He saw Dawn Faye coming up behind Crane, and he touched his cap to her. There were a half dozen men standing outside the Crown Saloon, and all of them turned to look at the girl as she went by. She smiled her greeting to Brant.

The newspaper man watched the girl and then the drifters in front of the saloon. He said, "So she's going down-river with you. A very sad story, Brant."

"She's had her troubles," Brant nodded. "I hope she doesn't have any more on our trip." Watching the toughs in front of the saloon he was suddenly glad that none of them appeared to have the money to buy a down-river ticket.

Crane said, "You only have a few days in this town, Brant. Stop in the Empire tonight. There are a few of us usually indulge in a little mild poker."

Brant grinned. "My pleasure," he said. He remembered that he'd always enjoyed these little poker games with Crane and a few of the other leading citizens of Battle City, Crane invariably invited him to join them when his boat was anchored at the landing. It was one of those little pleasures he looked forward to after many weeks of up-river travel.

AT EIGHT o'clock that night, after eating on the boat, he walked to shore with Ed Ferguson. The mate left him at the Black Ox Saloon, and Brant kept on alone.

Entering the Empire, floorman Tom Malloy nodded to him pleasantly. Malloy was a big, ex-pugilist with a battered face, one of three bouncers Samuels employed in his establishment. Malloy stood at his usual position just to the left of the batwing doors.

Malloy said, "Nice fight last night, Brant."

Brant waved to him and kept going. He found Crane and three others at a corner table and he bought his chips at the bar, unbuttoned his coat and dropped down into the vacant chair.

The stakes were never high in this game, which was the reason Brant liked to play. It was friendly poker in every sense of the word, with much more talking going on than was usually the case at gambling games. Pete Samuels himself sat in the game, along with the freight line owner, Tobias Franke, and Lew Sanders, the professional gambler.

At midnight Sanders sat back and grinned. He said, "Brant, you're cleaning us."

Brant placed both his bandaged hands on the table and looked at the small pile of chips in front of him. His luck had been good tonight, and the time had passed swiftly. He took a cigar from his coat pocket, and was turning to call for a waiter to bring more when a man popped his head over the batwing doors and yelled,

"MacLean! Some toughs got Ed Ferguson over in Paradise Alley."

Brant came out of his chair in one big

bound, upsetting the chair as he left it. He slapped the cigar from his mouth and sprinted toward the door, nearly knocking a waiter down with a tray of beer bottles and glasses.

Tom Malloy, the floorman, held something out to him as he shot by. Malloy yelled, "Might need this, Brant."

Brant snatched at it with his bandaged right hand as he went by. He didn't quite see the object, but he knew what it was and he realized it would come in good stead. Malloy usually carried inside his coat a length of lead pipe about ten inches long, something he used when more than one tough assailed him at the same time.

Brant went off the three porch steps in one big bound and turned left, racing through the passersby. Paradise Alley was an intersection at the next corner, a narrow ten foot wide lane with big warehouses on either side. The alley led down to the river from the main street.

Three men were standing at the mouth of the alley when he came up, looking intently at something going on in the shadows there, but none seemed anxious to take part in it.

Suddenly Brant remembered Harvey's warning and he slowed down, the length of lead pipe gripped in his right hand, hurting his battered knuckles as he clenched it.

He shoved in between the three watchers and heard the sounds of scuffling, panting men less than a dozen feet away. He could make out their forms, rocking back and forth. He counted four, then he heard Ed Ferguson's muffled oath.

He charged in then, like a maddened bull, and he never saw the foot suddenly stuck out in front of him. A man had been standing in the shadows against the right wall, and as Brant tore in this man's foot tripped him. He went down heavily, falling forward on his face, and in that moment he saw his danger and realized that this was a trap for him and that Ferguson had been used as a decoy.

Rolling rapidly to his right as he landed, Brant came up on hands and knees, still retaining the length of pipe Malloy had given him, thankful now for the bouncer's thoughtfulness.

The tough who had tripped him had made a flying dive after him, and Brant heard his body hit the dirt. He slashed at the man's head with the pipe, missing the head, but crashing the object down on the tough's shoulder, bringing a scream of pain.

He yelled, "All right, Ed. Give it to them!"

Scrambling to his feet he slashed again with the club as another tough tore in at him, reaching for his waist, trying to ram him back against the wall of the building. He caught this man squarely across the skull with the lead pipe and saw him drop without a sound. The man was probably dead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pirate Combine

A KNIFE cut through his coat on the right side as he leaped back along the wall, slashing with the pipe. More men were coming into the alley, men making no sounds, dark shapes in the night. They rushed him and he struck fiercely with the club, dropping two more. He heard Ferguson cursing bitterly, punching at one man, getting knocked down and rising again to fight.

One tough came in under the lead pipe, trying to grapple him around the legs and throw him. Brant caught this man by the back of the collar with his left hand, pushed him downward and then brought his left knee up viciously into the tough's face. The man moaned as he dropped.

A crowd had started to assemble at the head of the alley, and Brant lifted his voice and yelled, "George—Ben!"

George Bender, the engineer, and Harvey, the clerk, charged in. Harvey was no fighter, Brant knew, but Bender was as tough as nails and loved a good scrap. He heard Bender's voice, low, vibrant.

"Didn't know it was you," the engineer said. He came in like a thunderbolt, smashing with clubby fists.

Brant broke away from the wall, hitting with his lead pipe, and the band of toughs gave it up, fleeing down the alley toward the river. A man staggered toward Brant, moaning a little, and Brant caught him. It was Ed Ferguson. He said anxiously, "You all right, Ed?"

When Ferguson started to go down, Brant picked him up and carried him out of the alley. George Bender was saying, "Who's that? Who's that?"

"Let's get Ed out of here," Brant grated. "He's been hurt."

They got Ferguson out of the alley and into the nearest saloon. Blood was pouring from a cut on his forehead, and his face was puffed from the hammering he'd taken. When they sat him down in a chair and Brant got a little whiskey into his mouth he came around. He shook his head, looked at Brant, and started to curse again.

"They were after you, Brant," he growled. "There were only three of them when they rushed me into the alley. Must have been a half dozen more waiting in the back. They all jumped in when you arrived."

"How'd you know he was in there?" Bender asked curiously, looking at Brant.

Brant explained briefly. "That gent called me out of the Empire was another one of

them," he said, and then he realized how unusual it was that ten men should be organized in a business where seldom more than two worked together.

Ben Harvey came into the saloon with the announcement that all the toughs had managed to run or crawl away.

"We went in there with a lantern," Harvey said. "They're gone."

Langley Crane came in with the harassed Sheriff Tate Moran. Moran said bitterly, "I need a dozen men to patrol this town, MacLean. I got one boy. We can't be all over at once."

"I'm not blaming you," Brant said. He was daubing at Ferguson's cut brow with a wet towel a bartender had brought over.

Crane said, "Back alley toughs?"

Brant looked up, jaw tight. "Ten of them," he said.

Crane whistled and looked at Moran. "When they run ten together what does that mean, Tate?"

"This town's going right to hell," Moran said morosely.

Langley Crane said to Brant, "You see what it's coming to? Watch your step on the river."

"Jack Flood skipped town," Moran stated. "If that means anything."

Brant helped Ed Ferguson to his feet. "We'll get back to the boat," he said grimly. Langley Crane walked beside him as they went down to the landing. The newspaperman said thoughtfully, "It means that they're organizing, Brant. Somebody is getting them together, and this was the first move after that half million. They wanted to keep your boat and the money here so that they could go after it during the winter. It sounds like Flood. If he's behind it you won't have too much to worry about, but if a smarter man takes over you might have a hell of a time on the way down."

In his cabin that night Brant went over the matter carefully with Bender, Harvey and the bandaged Ed Ferguson, lying on the couch nearby.

"Every man on board ship will be armed," he said quietly. "We'll have the protection of the boat and anybody trying to attack us will have to do it from the shore. Two hundred men should be able to hold off almost any number, and we'll be moving all the time."

"Their only chance," Harvey stated calmly, "is for the *Judy Greene* to go down. Then they can grab the miners separately as they swim ashore and strip them of their gold belts."

"We won't go down," Ed Ferguson said sourly. "Flood will try to make a stupid fight from the shore. When we open up on them, they'll scatter in the woods."

"If it's Flood," Harvey murmured, "which we don't know."

Brant MacLean puffed on his pipe thoughtfully, staring at the deck. He said, "We'll put a double guard on the boat while we're tied here. When we leave we'll take all precautions. When we tie up at night we'll set an armed guard on shore. When we see a woodhawk selling cordwood on shore, we'll send a small boat in before pulling over ourselves. It'll take us longer, but it'll be safer."

"We don't want to lose this boat," Ferguson said from the couch. He was looking up at the ceiling when he said it.

Brant MacLean glanced at the other men and he knew what they were thinking. They knew how much the *Judy Greene* meant to him, how he'd slaved for it and built up his trade, the chances he'd taken to make a little extra money to pay his debts. They wanted to fight for him now, and it was a nice thing.

PASSENGERS started to come aboard the *Judy Greene* on Monday night, preparatory to the departure early the next morning. Many of the miners unrolled their blankets on the deck and slept out in the open.

The extra bunks Brant had constructed were finished now, and he'd moved his own cot into Ferguson's cabin in order that Miss Faye might take over his. Several times he'd considered the advisability of leaving the girl in Battle City because of the possible danger to the boat, but remembering Crane's sombre predictions concerning the coming winter, he decided against it.

Crane came aboard that night also for a final word with Brant. The newspaperman said quietly, "I've watched this town since it was started five years ago. I can sense changes; I can read its pulse. There are less men in the streets today than there were yesterday or the day before; there are less hangers-on in the saloons. Does that mean anything?"

"It might," Brant admitted.

"We have the cavalry up at Fort Larrimore for protection against the Sioux. It would appear white men need more protection from other white men."

"We'll hope not," Brant smiled.

At dawn the next morning he walked down to the hotel and found Dawn Faye waiting for him in the lobby. They went back through the empty streets together and she went aboard.

Cordwood was still being piled on board, racked around the engine room. Passengers were coming on every moment, running down the streets toward the landing.

Brant saw Clay Hemsley standing on the texas deck, watching the scene. The gambler took the cigar from his mouth when he saw the girl. Brant met the man fifteen minutes

later on the main deck. He'd seen Dawn Faye to the cabin and smiled at her protestations that she did not want to put him out of his quarters.

Hemsley was watching the passengers come aboard, Ben Harvey checking them, when Brant came up. Hemsley said evenly, "Didn't know we had a woman passenger, Captain."

Brant explained the details briefly. He said, "It'll be a pretty rough trip, one woman and all these men, but she's willing to take the risk."

Hemsley nodded and tossed his half-smoked cigar into the river. He said, "If it's a matter of money I'd be glad to pay her passage to St. Louis some other way. Are there any bull outfits headed south?"

Brant looked at the man queerly. "Nothing going south but the *Judy Greene,*" he stated. "I'm sure Miss Faye will appreciate your offer."

"You needn't tell her," Hemsley said carelessly and he strolled away.

Brant stared after the man. When Ed Ferguson came up, he said slowly, "Why should Mr. Hemsley be concerned about Miss Faye?"

"Is he?" the mate asked.

"Wanted to pay her way down if there was any other way but by boat," Brant said. "What does that mean?"

"He's a gentleman," Ferguson growled, "or he knows we might have trouble this trip."

"Everybody knows that," Brant observed. He watched the planks coming up and then he went up the ladder to the pilot house.

A crowd had started to gather at seven o'clock in the morning and they lined the shore, watching quietly as the crew cast off the hawsers.

There was a mist on the river this early in the morning, but the rising sun was driving it away. Smoke gushed from the *Judy Greene's* stacks. Men waved from the crowded decks and a big cheer went up from the shore as Brant rang his bells and the packet backed out into mid-stream.

He brought the boat around, pointed her down-river, and in five minutes Battle City was left behind. He watched a flock of Canadian geese honking by, headed south. He took the *Judy Greene* past Sioux Bluffs on the right bank and then in around Markham's Island through the Chutes. He had eight feet of water in the Chutes and he knew then that he would get down-river without too much trouble, and if he did hit a sand bar here and there he could get over it with his spars in the usual "grasshopper" fashion.

Down below him on the texas and on the main decks he could see the swarms of men, standing around watching the shores, or seated on improvised seats of packing cases.

Clay Hemsley was talking with a stocky man with a red beard up near the bow of the boat just to the right of the capstan. It was the first time Brant had noticed the gambler taking notice of anyone. Even in town Hemsley appeared to avoid the society of other men. He'd played cards and made bets on Samuels' roulette wheel, but when he drank he drank alone. It appeared he didn't like people.

Ed Ferguson came into the pilot house, closing the door behind him. He stood in front of the window at Brant's elbow, watching the river. He said suddenly, "I never got a good look at those gents who jumped me in Paradise Alley the other night, but one of them had a beard."

Brant glanced at him quickly then, and noticed that Ferguson was not looking at the river, but at Clay Hemsley and the man with the red beard.

Ferguson went on quietly, "I got a hand into that beard, Brant, and came away with some of it. I had a few wisps of it still stuck in my fingernails when I cleaned up after the mess. They were red hairs."

Brant stared down at the man with the red beard. "Not enough evidence there to hang a man," he stated.

"No," Ferguson said grimly, "but we can watch him, and watch his associates."

"You have a job," Brant said.

"Where do we pull up tonight?" Ferguson wanted to know.

"Off Oak Bluffs," Brant told him. "We should make it before dark. Maybe before it gets dark."

"I'll sign off the guard for tonight," Ferguson said. "These boys will be glad to serve guard duty when they know that every man will be called upon to do it. It's their money they'll be protecting."

BRANT nodded. When Ferguson went out he was left alone in the pilot room and he concentrated on the river. The down run was always much simpler. There were no sawyers to worry about, coming toward them; they moved with the swift current and his only worry was the sand bars. When they struck a bar going down-stream they plowed in all the deeper, making it that much harder to get off; if they hit a sharp rock at this rate of speed, the hull went in like an eggshell and the boat went down.

He noticed no Sioux smoke signals that morning and assumed that the Indians had given it up as a bad job after their failure to do damage on the up trip. When the land opened up here and there and he had long glimpses of open prairie and rolling hills, he studied each side of the river carefully. Once he saw a small party of Indians, squaws,

travois and camp equipage moving across the brow of a hill a mile distant, but that was all.

At twelve o'clock Dawn Faye came into the pilot house with a big covered tray full of food and a coffee pot. When she took the napkin from the tray Brant looked down at a crispy baked apple pie.

He said, "You've been in the galley, Miss Faye."

"I told you I intend to work while I was traveling," the girl smiled. "I hope you like the pie."

"Our cook made one on the up-river trip," Brant said without smiling. "I threw it out of the pilot house window. It hit the side of Jefferson Cliff and knocked fifty tons of rock and dirt into the Missouri."

Dawn Faye laughed lightly as she set the tray down. Brant waited for Ed Ferguson to come in and relieve him. He said, "Ever been in a pilot house before?"

"I never traveled on a river boat until today," the girl said. "It's wonderful."

Brant nodded. "I thought you'd like it," he said. "Never knew a woman to feel otherwise."

"You've been on the river a long time?" she asked.

"I was a cabin boy when I was twelve," Brant said. "And a full-fledged Mississippi River pilot when I was twenty-one. I've owned the *Judy Greene* for two years now."

"You never get tired of the river?" the girl asked him.

"A man gets tired of living," Brant said, "but never of the river."

"Sometimes I wish," Dawn Faye smiled faintly, "that I had been a man."

"Then," Brant said without looking at her, "you might have made some young fellow very unhappy."

She laughed at that and she left him with the tray and the coffee pot. Ed Ferguson came in, looked down at the tray and sniffed through his nose.

"A hell of a boat," he scowled, "when tea is served by the ladies aboard."

"Watch that Elbow Bend Channel," Brant said. "Hug the right bank and then swing out toward the tip of the island when you pass Crown Point."

"Go ahead and eat," Ferguson told him.

Brant took the tray over to the bench along the wall and sat down.

Ferguson said over his shoulder, "Too damned quiet today. You think anybody's following this boat?"

"They could do it easily enough," Brant said. "We're making fast time but we have to go up and down every bend in the river. They can cut across the necks and save as much as ten miles in one spot alone."

Ed Ferguson thought about this as Brant ate his dinner. He found the pie good and he ate fully half of it. He went out on the texas after that and walked for ten minutes, stretching his legs. He stopped to speak with a number of the miners and learned that they were enthusiastic regarding the plan to set a guard every night.

"Been away from home two years," one gray-haired man told him quietly. "I'm taking my poke back to Connecticut to buy a decent farm. My old lady's been waiting and writing every time a mail came through. We have four kids." He added, "I'm not figuring on losing my dust this trip, Captain."

"We'll do everything we can to protect it," Brant assured him.

He spoke to other men and it was always the same story. They'd come west to make quick money because they'd sweated all of their lives on grubby farms or in big city mills. They had their small pile now and they wanted to get back to their families, their sweethearts, so that they could start in again, this time on a higher level.

It had not been easy in the mines. Some of them had dug for six months at a stretch, making a dollar a day. Others had had to work a neighbor's claim at ditch-diggers' wages until able to make a small strike themselves. They had sweated and starved and fought for their dust and they had a right to get back to civilization with it.

At six o'clock that evening Brant edged the *Judy Greene* into the shadows along Oak Bluff, a fifty-foot high slope fringed with dwarf oak. They tied up in the deep water at the base of the bluff and the first guard, consisting of a dozen men, went ashore with rifles and sixguns. They spread out, forming a semicircle on either side of the bluff and on top of it.

Another party of twenty-five men went ashore with axes to cut wood. They worked till it was too dark to see and then Brant had flares lighted so that the wood could be carried aboard. He was standing by the gangplank, watching the woodcutters come aboard, when Clay Hemsley came up.

"Good time today," Hemsley stated. "You expect to get past Graveyard Bend tomorrow night?"

"Shouldn't have much trouble," Brant said, and only after he said it did he realize that this was unusual. On down-river trips most packet captains pulled in to shore for the night on the other side of Graveyard Bend the second day out of Battle City. Along the river every pilot and captain knew the myriad names of bluffs, bends, points, islands, bars and every conceivable object which would enable them to recognize a particular portion of the river when a fellow riverman was discussing it. This information was stored away in their

minds and in note books, along with pertinent facts on how to run that particular stretch of the river.

Very definitely Brant knew the average passenger was in the dark concerning these markers, and unless he had spoken to someone familiar with the river could be expected to have but slight acquaintance with them. Very few passengers knew that a down-river packet pulled up the second night on the other side of Graveyard Bend, a particularly treacherous, rock-filled channel on which two packets had foundered in two years.

CHAPTER SIX

Graveyard Bend

BRANT MacLEAN stuffed his pipe and lighted it. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket and watched the woodcutters coming aboard. Hemsley walked away and Brant saw his slim figure moving across the main deck toward the stern. He saw the man with the red beard standing near a pile of cordwood, and Hemsley paused to say a few words to him before passing on. The slim man's shoulders shook when a spell of coughing took possession of him, and listening to that cough Brant realized Clay Hemsley did not have too long to live and he remembered that there were no more dangerous men on earth than those who were slowly dying and knowing it.

Dawn Faye stood in the shadows near the ladder, and Brant walked over to her, touching his cap as he came up. He said quietly, "If I forget to tell you, tomorrow afternoon after four o'clock lock yourself in the cabin."

He could see her face in the flickering red light from the flares. There was no fear in her eyes. She said, "All right, Captain." She didn't ask why.

The night was quiet. Twice Brant got up, came down on the deck, and stepped to shore. When he came up to the first guard he called softly, "Hear anything?"

"Not a sound."

MacLean went back on the boat and he was thinking of Graveyard Bend with the black rocks along the right bank, and the thirty feet of water in the bend. Those rocks were sharp claws stretching out into the channel, trying to snare every packet going through. The current was tricky at this spot because it swung in around an island to the north of the bend and then rushed toward the rocks. A pilot had to give himself plenty room at the start of the run or he would find himself running head on against the bank.

To make the run even more complicated, there was a sand bar half way down the channel covered by a foot of water. The packet *General U. S. Grant* had struck the sand bar first before spinning and crashing into the rocks beyond.

Carefully, Brant reviewed everything he knew about Graveyard Bend. The shoreline above the rocks was heavily wooded, and a regiment of troops could be concealed within thirty yards of the passing boat without being seen. Remembering this fact, Brant did not like it.

In the morning, with the bright sunlight streaming through the pilot house windows and a crisp breeze rippling the water, he tried to rid himself of these fantastic premonitions. Hemsley had as yet given them no cause for alarm. He may have heard from a passenger more familiar with the river that the packet usually tied up beyond Graveyard Bend, and that was all there was to it.

Brant made good time in the morning. They made one stop when a woodhawk called to them from the bank as he stood in front of his neatly-piled cords of cottonwood. Brant had the wood and the man taken aboard.

Ordinarily, the second day from Battle City, he went through Graveyard Bend at five o'clock in the afternoon, making the late run because there was a good landing place on the other side. He wanted to anticipate this time by an hour if it was possible today, but they were held up when George Bender reported trouble in the engine room.

Impatiently, Brant pulled up ten miles above Graveyard Bend until Bender gave him an 'all clear' signal. It was after five o'clock, and the red sun was casting a ruddy glow on the river as they approached the bend.

They were out in mid-stream, and Brant considered once the advisability of pulling in toward either shore and remaining there overnight. He'd never gone in close to these banks, however, and there was always the possibility of running onto a hidden bar. He had plenty of light to make the bend run.

Ferguson came in and watched for a few moments in silence as they approached the bend. They were still a mile away. Ferguson said, "Don't knock our bottom out, Brant."

He left and Brant heard the door close behind him. Gorge Island was ahead of him now, and he swung in toward the right bank, watching the channel passage open before him. The rocks of Graveyard Bend were scattered another half mile beyond the entrance to the channel, and he had to make a sharp turn at the bend before coming upon them.

Five minutes after Ferguson went out, the door opened again and closed, and Brant, assuming it was the mate, said, "Ed, I'd put another ten men on guard duty tonight."

There was no reply for several seconds, and Brant turned his head slightly. He had to concentrate on the channel now because they

were moving past the tip of Gorge Island, running into the channel and the water was very fast. He said impatiently, "Ed—"

He heard Clay Hemsley's soft, even voice. "I'm afraid, Captain, you won't be needing a guard on this boat tonight."

Brant turned his head completely then and saw the gambler leaning against the little door, a short-barreled Smith & Wesson in his hand, the muzzle pointing at Brant's back. They were less than five feet apart.

Eyes hard, Brant turned his attention again to the river, realizing that Hemsley had caught him at a damn bad moment. The current was already swinging them in toward the right bank and he had to bring the packet out again and fight it against the drive of the current. One moment's inattention, he knew, at this particular spot was enough to send the *Judy Greene* into the right bank, smashing the hull, sinking her in the deep water here.

Brant said slowly, "What's the meaning of this, Mr. Hemsley?"

Hemsley stepped up behind him, jammed the muzzle of the gun into the small of his back and then reached around inside Brant's jacket, slipping the Army Colt from the waistband.

Once, while the man's left arm was around him, Brant contemplated the risk of suddenly jerking away to the right, jamming Hemsley against the pilot house wall and fighting for the gun. He knew though that the moment his hands were off the spokes of the wheel the boat was doomed.

"We might just as well understand each other," Clay Hemsley said softly. "I intend to wreck this boat, Captain."

"A damned risky business," Brant commented, "and it'll get you a hanging in the end."

He heard Hemsley's low laugh. "When a man has but a few years to live," he said, "even hanging is not to be feared."

"You're after the gold dust these men carry," Brant said. He continued to watch the channel, sending the packet around the sharp bend in the river. "You'll have a hell of a time," he went on, "stripping two hundred men of their gold belts even if this boat does go down and we have to swim ashore."

"Jack Flood is in the timber with seventy-five men," Hemsley purred, "and I'm in the pilot house with you, telling you where you'll smash this boat on the rocks."

BRANT'S lips tightened and his fingers gripped the spokes till the knuckles were white. He had a vision of the *Judy Greene* lying next to the white skeleton which was the *General U. S. Grant,* in thirty feet of Missouri River water.

"You're a clever man, Mr. Hemsley," he said. "I presume you came up-river with this in mind."

"Precisely," Hemsley admitted. "I'd heard talk in St. Louis of the gold shipments coming down-river at the end of each summer. I decided to go up with you, organize the rough element of Battle City, and waylay your boat on the way down."

"You worked fast," Brant said. He had one swift hope that Ed Ferguson would walk in here again, and then he saw the mate going down toward the main deck from the texas. Ferguson did not look his way. "Were you behind that attack on me in the alley?" Brant asked, sparring for time.

"That was Flood's stupidity," Hemsley said. "My plans, I am sure, were much better formulated."

"Suppose I refuse to run on the rocks?" Brant asked.

"I should be forced to shoot you in the back," Hemsley said evenly, "and run aground myself. I am not accustomed to shooting men in the back, but I need this money, Captain. I do not have long to live. I intend to finish in decent style."

They were around the bend now, and Brant could see the jagged black rocks along the right bank and the heavy timber beyond them. The river was seventy-five yards wide at this point and he had the *Judy Greene* out in the center of the channel, giving himself plenty of room.

Brant MacLean moistened his lips. He had a thin smile on his face. "You're plan is not air-tight, Hemsley, no matter how clever it is. Every ship hitting a rock does not go down. Many of them strike on a shelf and stay there. With over two hundred men aboard we can stand off your seventy-five until Kingdom Come."

"I have been told of that," Clay Hemsley stated softly, "and have made preparations to cover just such a situation. We brought with us a small six-pounder with which to batter your hull just below the water line if the boat fails to go down after smashing in among the rocks. I had the cannon run down here two days ago on an old freight wagon."

"That could be a damned bluff," Brant said.

"You'll see it in among the trees as we get eloser to the rocks," Clay Hemsley chuckled. "Now start moving in, my friend."

Brant stared at the narrow channel ahead of him with the island on one side and the black rocks on the other. He saw the rusted smokestacks of the *General U. S. Grant* lying up among the rocks where they had fallen when the packet struck.

"Right in there," Hemsley said quietly, "up against the smokestacks."

Brant looked at the ledges and broken rock along this stretch, remembering there was a

sandbar out in the water at this point, and that every river pilot swung out wide here more afraid of that bar than of the rocks. Hemsley would not know about that bar because it was under water.

There was a movement in among the trees up above the smokestacks. Very distinctly, Brant saw a man move from one tree to another. He felt the pressure of Hemsley's gun in the small of his back and he heard the ominous click of the hammer.

"I hate to shoot a man in the back," Hemsley said slowly. "Why make me do that, Captain?"

"We're going in," Brant growled. He swung the tiller and the *Judy Greene* suddenly curved in toward the rocks and the sand bar. He knew that the packet would never touch the rocks, and he knew also that he had put the boat on the bar hard enough so that it would not swing off with the current and crash farther down stream.

"You're a wise man," Hemsley said, evidently relieved.

Brant braced himself for the crash. He gripped the tiller wheel with both hands and he watched the rocks sliding closer. Down below he saw Ed Ferguson dart out of the salon door and stare up toward the pilot house, mouth open, the color leaving his face.

Several passengers up in the bow, suddenly taking note of the new course of the boat, let out yells of alarm. Brant MacLean kept the *Judy Greene* straight on the course toward the sand bar.

Hemsley was not expecting the crash to come so soon. The rocks were still fifteen yards away across an expanse of shallow water. There was a terrific grinding sound as the *Judy Greene* plowed into the soft sand of the bar.

Brant lurched away from the wheel, bracing himself against the wall of the pilot house. Hemsley was knocked forward, his body striking the wheel, breaking off one of the spokes.

Down below passengers on deck were knocked down like so many tenpins, several driven right off the deck into the shallow water.

Brant was knocked completely across the little room when the boat lurched and hung at an angle on the bar, the hull completely out of water.

Clay Hemsley was down on hands and knees when Brant scrambled to his feet, snatching up the Army Colt Hemsley had taken from him and dropped when they struck.

As Hemsley started to get up, dazedly, Brant grabbed him by the coat, swung him around, and hit him sharply on the chin with his right fist. Hemsley slumped to the deck again.

Ripping open the pilot house door, Brant tore through and headed for the ladder to the main deck. He saw Ferguson righting himself, shaking his head dizzily. There were fifteen or twenty men up in the bow of the boat, and Brant yelled at them, "Follow me. They're training a cannon on the boat."

He went over the side then, gun in hand, dropping into a foot of muddy water. He heard Ferguson roaring at the men on the boat, ordering them over the side after him. He heard the splashes and the yells of bewildered men.

"Cannon!" Ferguson was howling. "Get after the Captain, you dogs, if you want to save your money!"

BRANT tore through the water, falling once in his haste, but managing to hold the gun aloft so that it did not get wet. He had one thought in mind: to reach the six-pounder before Flood's toughs could get it trained on the *Judy Greene*. He had a clear vision of what one well-placed shot into the packet's hull could do. If the ball went through below the water line and the hold was flooded, that extra weight of water would roll the boat off the sand bar and into the deep water beyond.

He heard Ferguson coming behind him, still yelling, "Cannon, boys! They have a cannon. Get the devils!"

Brant was out of the water now, scrambling up among the rocks and over the rusted smokestacks from the *General U. S. Grant*. He caught his first real glimpse of Hemsley's toughs then—a half dozen of them gathered around the cannon which they had placed up on a rough log platform so that it could shoot down from the bank.

They were in the fringe of timber just beyond the rocks, hidden among the trees. Brant went over the ridge of a big rock and plunged forward.

A man rose up out of the bushes less than five yards to his left, the surprise showing on his face. He was lifting his sixgun when Brant shot him through the forehead with the first bullet from the Army Colt.

The men at the cannon had spotted him now. One of them already had the burning taper at the touch-hole when Brant broke through the trees. A puff of smoke gushed from the mouth of the cannon, followed by a thunderous roar. Falling forward on his face, Brant heard the quick rush of the cannon ball in the air over his head. He opened with the Colt, firing wildly into the group around the cannon, dropping two men.

Ferguson and twenty-five men from the boat were coming over the rocks now, others swarming off the packet, wading through the water. Brant heard the wild Rebel yell mingling with the deep-pitched Union Army roar of fighting men and he realized that on his boat he'd had veterans from both armies.

Flood's toughs had been scattered up and down along the river, but they had started to converge when Brant came ashore with his first small group.

The men nearest the cannon had dropped back in among the trees, and Brant knocked down another one, emptying his gun. As he lay on the ground, Ed Ferguson dropped down beside him, gasping for breath.

"Hemsley?" he panted.

Brant jammed fresh cartridges into the cylinder. He nodded grimly. "Was up in the pilot house with a gun in my back."

Another larger wave of miners swept over the rocks and they now outnumbered the toughs on the shore. Brant leaped to his feet, waving his Colt, yelling, "Sweep them out! Sweep them out!"

They went forward over one hundred and fifty strong now, driving in among the trees. Brant saw the gigantic Jack Flood trying to slip away off to his right, and it was Ben Harvey who knelt down with his rifle and calmly dropped him.

The toughs in the woods broke and fled now, scattering in all directions. Brant pulled up suddenly and swung around, a terrible thought taking possession of him. He saw George Bender coming up.

"They got one shot off with that six-pounder," Brant gasped. "Did it hit us, George?"

"Through the hull," Bender panted, "above the water line. There's no water going in. I think we can back her off."

Brant felt suddenly weak. He looked at Ed Ferguson and managed to grin. He was remembering that Dawn Faye had been locked in his cabin when the packet went aground.

"One little job left," Brant said quietly. "We'll settle that now."

"Clay Hemsley," Ferguson nodded. "I'll find a tree, you get the rope."

They were clambering down over the rocks when they saw the man slipping into the water, dropping over the side of the *Judy Greene*. He started to wade ashore, high beaver perched on the side of his head, a gun in his hand.

Brant said quietly, "Wait here, gentlemen."

"Now," Ferguson protested. "That dog—"

Brant started to walk forward out into the water, the Army Colt in his right hand. He'd lost his cap in the rush and he was wet all the way through from his fall in the river. He'd cut his left hand somewhere and the blood was dripping into the muddy river as the water swirled around his knees.

Clay Hemsley saw him coming and he stopped. He was smiling when he said it, but Brant MacLean saw the devil in that smile. "Captain, I will kill you for this," Hemsley said.

He lifted his Smith & Wesson fast and sent a slug whistling by Brant's cheek, just cutting the skin.

Brant fired once. He held the gun ready for a second shot, but he saw then that he would not need it and he let the gun hand drop to his side.

Hemsley bent over as if bowing. His high beaver fell from his head, dropped into the rapidly-moving water and floated swiftly down-stream. Hemsley slipped into the water himself, falling with a very small splash.

The current caught his frail, wasted body and carried it off the sand bar, into deeper water, where it disappeared. In the yellow mud color of the river where Hemsley had fallen, Brant MacLean saw the ruddy hue of blood.

He walked the rest of the way to the packet, noticing where the six-pound shot had gone through the hull. There was a jagged hole, but his carpenter could repair that temporarily in a few hours.

Dawn Faye was standing on the main deck when he climbed aboard again, river water running from him. He knew that she'd seen the final act of this attempted hold-up of his boat. She was very pale, and she was clinging to a door frame, watching him.

He said a very strange thing, indicating the disordered condition of his mind at the moment. "Miss Faye, if that cousin doesn't treat you right in St. Louis, I expect to be in the city all winter. I'd like to help you."

She was standing in the doorway, head down, as she said an even stranger thing,

"Mr. MacLean, I have no cousin in St. Louis. I—I had to get down-river because I was afraid to stay in Battle City." She looked steadily at him then, and she said, "Captain, you'll have to forgive me. I was very much alone in Battle City."

Brant nodded. He said gently, "Miss Faye, you'd better go to your cabin and rest now. You needn't be alone any more if you don't want it that way." He studied her face carefully as he said this and saw that she understood him.

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but could not find the words. He saw the great gratitude in her brown eyes, and then something else. He was very glad for the other thing.

Dawn Faye said, "Thank you, Captain." She went away then.

Brant MacLean was still standing there, looking at the doorway, when Ed Ferguson climbed over the side, grumbling to himself.

"You look like you lost something, Brant," Ferguson scowled.

"Found something," Brant MacLean said softly, "very valuable."

THE END

THE BREAKING OF

A Western Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Floodhead Bet

SINCE four in the morning the storm had been cutting its violent fireworks on the Mogollon, and it was still a solid, boiling mass of leaden gray. The boy timed it to the second of seven o'clock, and cut weather sign from it. He snapped shut the etched front of his big silver watch, breathed on it, buffed it against his thin chest with a grin and raced down the outside steps from the roof with a whoop.

He busted into the kitchen like a wild colt and restrained himself with an effort at his sister's frown. She said, "Hurry and wash now, Johnny, and do yore ears or I'll scalp you! This is Saturday."

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He said, "Yes ma'am," and turned back out to the wash basin with unusual meekness. He came back brushed and gleaming and stopped by the window to look out through the streaming golden light at the black pall beyond that still milled upon the mesa.

"A humdinger!" he muttered, looked at his watch again, buffed it and sat down to breakfast.

She set fried steak, beans and eggs in front of him and turned back to the stove to pour his coffee. She was young, with a capable efficiency in her movements and the long, trim lines of good blood and breeding. She had been raised by men and with men and could meet them on their level. She was eight years her brother's senior, but had the bearing and self-assurance of greater maturity; she could not recall the day she had not regarded even her older brothers with maternal responsibility.

She put his coffee down and pulled his ears while she examined them and then poured herself a second cup and sat down. She

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watched him a moment with a quizzical expression. "When you wash clean the first time," she said, "there is something cooking."

He grinned around a hunk of steak too big to swallow. "This is a business day," he told her. "I'm not taking any chances on yore temper!"

He pulled out his watch again and looked out at the storm to be sure it was still there, four miles away. "She'll last most all day now, sure'n pot," he allowed with conviction.

"Just be sure that storm and yore business doesn't get you a blistered bottom!" she warned.

"This is all on the square and in the clear," he told her. "Mebbe even you'd take some of it."

"Mebbe you'll tell me what it's all about," she laughed.

"The Iron Duke," the boy said. There was a lot of worship and a lot of pride in the way he said it. "The Duke sent word by Charley Watrous that he'd be back from Quatro today. Now, no man could ride through that storm, could he?"

"Well," she compromised, "no man in his right mind would try unless he had to."

The boy sat back with a look of satisfaction. "What do you want to bet he won't come through?"

"But *why*?" she asked curiously.

"Why?" he blurted back at her. "Why, jist because he's the Iron Duke and he said he would! Ain't that enough?"

She frowned with misgivings and uncertainty. "Well, in some men it is, and in others not. It depends on the reason."

The boy looked at his plate with a stubborn expression. "Don't Bull keep his word when he says something?"

"Of course," she nodded. "But Bull doesn't say something without a reason. Bull isn't living for his arrogance and pride, Johnny. He has a ranch and he is not too proud to work at it. Bull can use his gun when he has to, but he doesn't build fights just to use it."

The boy darkened beneath his smooth, even tan. "The Duke ain't no common tough gunslick!" he muttered. "He could be a top rancher if he wanted to!"

She was silent a long moment, with rumor and gossip running through her in a solid stream. She had heard the Duke was cruel and arrogant and ruthless, with such vanity he could not even take a joke without calling a man out to pay for it with lead. He had hit town with money and had money ever since without working, and in most, that would have been a bad sign, but he had wicked luck at gambling, and he had something of a business head. She had heard him cursed and sworn into perdition behind his back, but she had never heard his worst enemy accuse him of rustling or stealing or cheating, or using his guns for any other reason than to feed his pride and glory.

From the sink, she said across her shoulder, "He may be all right, Johnny; just be sure his ring is true. A man with an ace in the hole or a gun in his hand is a lot different when he is kicked in the dust and made to crawl. The difference is that men like Bull get up and fight all over again."

The boy murmured glumly, "Yessum."

She picked a silver dollar out of a sugar bowl and laid it down beside him. "Here, I'll loan you this. If your bets pan out, keep the winnings."

"Gee!" the boy yipped, dark mood forgotten. "Jeepers, sis, you're ornery as a blackjack jenny, but you're all right in a pinch. I've only got my knife and quirt and fishing lines and a nickel."

"The morning's yores for business," she smiled. "But you be here at two o'clock to ride me to the ranch."

"You betcha!" He nodded and ran out.

MIDWAY of afternoon they rode out along the singed russet basin with the Tonto running brim full across the plain. The storm still eddied over the Mogollon mesa, black and gray and ugly-looking, snapping fireworks and still full of driving sleet and wind. Saturday's incoming traffic was heavy and they moved through a continuous moil of gray and yellow dust.

At the fork they shucked free of traffic, bending northward on the Quatro Trail. No ranches lay in this direction but their own, and the trail was seldom used by others, but the smell of dust was fresh and acrid. Cutting sign, the boy puzzled, "We've passed nobody from out here or overland. No, this rider's ahead of us." He considered a moment, face screwed up, and then added, "I betcha it's Whitey Roark!"

"The gambler!" his sister grimaced. "I think mebbe we'll forget school and send you back to the ranch to live!"

"Aw, he's no friend of mine!" the boy scowled. "He's just a darned tough crook! But he left town ahead of us." He nodded off toward the rearing bluffs of the mesa. "That storm's blowing out. He could ride all the way to Quatro dry."

He said suddenly, "Hey, sis!" and reined up and squinted against the streaming golden light. His face became boyishly excited. "There's a rider on the bluffs and it wouldn't be nobody coming out of that storm but the Iron Duke! Boy, I'm rich! I got me ten and even fifteen to one laid down on him!"

She gave a constrained smile. "We won't be on this trail when he passes."

They were mounting a grade and the boy's brows were drawn together with perplexity. "He ain't taking the trail down," he muttered. "He's risking the face! Say, something's up. Let's hurry."

He put his horse into a gallop and she followed. On the brow of the hill, they looked down upon the rough, chopped and eroded country between them and the bluffs; against her will, excitement moved through her in a sheet, A dry arroyo cut the plain ahead of them, its sandy floor shimmering beneath trapped heat almost to the bluffs. At that point, its contour was abruptly blotted out, and it became a flat, gleaming, chocolate colored streak. The streak advanced, and narrowing her eyes, she recognized the wild, frothing churn of a floodhead spitting two ton boulders in its teeth.

The Mogollon storm had overflowed the regular creeks and draws and broken a channel into this old dry draw, and the flood was racing down full tilt. The Duke, if it was the Duke, had seen it, and figuring it might shut him off from town for that day, was trying to beat the floodhead to the ford which was the only way to cross the draw from where he was. He had put his horse down the first break in the mesa rim he found, and was skidding down a treacherous grade a full hundred feet.

It took cold nerve, and something that meant a lot more to Belle Merritt, it took horsemanship, and a horse that trusted its rider. Her brother was crimson with excitement and yelled, "Hey, let's see this!" and put his horse on a shortcut at the fullest gallop it could reach. They cut a quarter mile out of their trail and came out on a sloping shelf with the trail circling beneath them.

The rider who had been ahead was Whitey Roark; watching him, strong distaste ran over the girl's face. Nobody had ever proved anything on Whitey, or had not survived to tell about it, but for a long time there had been suspicions and vicious stories. Once a girl had committed suicide, and another time a man who had sworn to tell something on him was found dead from a rope hauling on the desert, and there had been talk at times about drunks beaten and robbed.

Whitey had cut the sign on the flood too and was high tailing with rowels digging and quirt flailing to hit the other side. They struck out in his hanging plume of mulberry tinted dust with the tattoo of his hoofbeats right before them, and reaching the grade into the ford, drew off on a hummock to watch.

These were long grades and the Duke was racing down the opposite side. A rising pulsation in the air marked the approaching floodhead, but water already was glinting across the ford. "Jeepers, that's rising three feet a minute!" the boy excitedly told his sister.

The ford had a narrow footing at best and, with rising water, offered only a fast passage ridge for one horse. To the sides of this ridge was loose stone and gravel, as both men knew. Whitey had the lead and the right of way and sent out his angry call to stand clear.

The Duke sent back a curse for answer, and laid his quirt down hard. He meant to drive through and let the other man wait, and any man in his right senses would have reined in and waited to battle it out on the other bank. Maybe Whitey thought he could bluff.

But not the Duke! His lean, blackburned face hardened and his eyes took on a fiery shine. He teetered on his pommel, dragging spurs clean the length of his horse. He put it plunging into the waters, his wide lips pulled back against his teeth in a wicked grin.

CHAPTER TWO

Tough Hombre

THE low, ominous roar of the flood was rising and suddenly burst on them as the floodhead tore around a corner, a boiling, foaming, wild and berserk solid wall of water. Whitey paled and yelled for the Duke to move over, and gave a few inches himself.

The Duke's grin turned unholy. He laid his quirt hard on his pony's rump and threw it forward so that it clipped the other horse full weight on the shoulder, driving it into the gravel and clearing the faster, flat ridge.

The Duke came haunching up the bank and wheeled as Whitey beat his horse floundering from under the rushing head of the flood and pulled free of it barely by a yard. He pulled abreast of the Duke, on a level right beneath them, and reined up, breathing hard. His face was a sick gray, and mayhem was in the slits of white that showed beneath the droop of thick white eyelids.

The Duke gave a careless, arrogant laugh and rolled a cigarette with his left hand. "Something turn you back, Whitey?" he asked above the flood roar.

Whitey Roark sucked in a deep breath and color streaked patchily into his face. He was a soft-fleshed man, a small man, but with the emotionless lethal danger of a snake. He caught his breathing and answered metalically, "You are getting purty big for yore pants, Duke."

The Duke waved out his match and watched the gambler arrogantly through his smoke. "That's what my pa used to say," he drawled.

"And nobody made you get a new pair, eh?" Whitey grated.

"No," the Duke admitted. "Seems like I got me a new gun instead. The one I'm

still wearing, Whitey. This one right here."

Whitey weighed the chances of a fight behind the inscrutable mask he kept at all times upon his expressions. His eyes flicked twice to the Duke's idle gun hand, and he reached some inward decision against a fight and put his attention upon quieting his black quarterbred. "Yeah," he allowed, "we heard you used it up to Quatro. Built the fight but lost yore money anyway, didn't you?"

"Who said that?" the Duke demanded harshly.

Whitey's eyes were suddenly cool and mocking. "So it's true?" he chuckled softly. "You shot 'em off, but they got away with the mazuma!"

The Duke darkened beneath his burn. His pride was stung and it rubbed all humor out of him. He snubbed his smoke and mangled the butt with a vicious tightening of his fingers. "I built the fight and I won the fight," he grated, "against three cardsharps with a crooked deck!" His gaze narrowed and turned truculent. "I got an idea one of them works for you sometimes, Whitey. And I got an idea I will get my money back!"

The gambler gave no answer. He had regained his cold and detached composure and there was no indication of what he thought or felt upon his face. He slapped his reins and started past the Duke. "Sometimes," he murmured, "I have seen men get too big even for their guns, Duke." A bright hard mockery floated on the surface of his albino eyes.

The Duke wheeled his horse with murder filling him, but some noise or range sense caused him to look up. He checked rein and sat an instant with his anger boiling, and then grudgingly touched his hat.

Johnny called down proudly, "Boy, you sure breasted him and made him take back seat, Duke!"

"Think so?" the Duke asked, and the compliment, and knowledge that the story would be told around, was like cool water to a thirsty man. His temper subsided into the deeper emotion of his vanity. He touched his horse and came up to their level. His jaunty arrogance was back upon him when he reined up.

He rolled a fresh smoke and said, "You should be careful where you take yore sister, Johnny. There might have been some rough action here."

The girl studied him curiously with mixed feelings on her face. He was just using that for something to say, she knew, but it was a thought that came from good background somewhere. Whitey, for instance, would not have thought to say it even as a wedge to get introduced. That fact was a puzzling thought behind her surprise at his looks.

It was the first time she had ever seen him close up. A flaming pride and arrogant conceit were beginning to put their permanent line into his lips, but otherwise he was quite decent looking. He met her glance suddenly, unexpectedly and with an impact that shook her. For the first time in her life, she felt awkward in the presence of a man.

He said, "That language, ma'am. I didn't see you over here." His lips gave a twist of humor. "I was kinda occupied with what was happening."

"You were in the wrong, of course," she told him honestly. "But it was daring, just the same. He would have reined in if he had thought you meant it."

He gave a gesture of arrogant humor. "He'll learn!" He gave a mock scowl at the grinning boy. "But you—you need a hiding! The cutoff's a hundred yards back. What brought you over?"

"We saw you pitch the cliff," the boy said enthusiastically. "Boy, that was riding, Duke!"

Duke grunted. "That? Why I've seen yore sister take a steeper slide sidesaddle!"

The girl's eyes opened wide and she colored. "You've seen *me?*"

"Why, yes, ma'am," he admitted. "On the Crosscut." A strained silence greeted him; the Crosscut was Merritt grass and a trail nowhere. He made an awkward admission but gave it decent face. "Matter of fact, I was on yore trail, not rustling. You were dressed cowboy fashion and I mistook you for Johnny and followed."

Mistaking her for Johnny was a bald lie, but not the other, and she darkened. She fought an instinctive desire to know and like this man. She noted his boots, still soggy, as if they had been soaked, and glanced off at the retreating storm. "Do you ride through those things for fun?" she asked.

"It was there," he said, "and I was on my way through."

"Didn't I tell you he would?" Johnny yipped. "Boy, will I make them crawl when I collect my bets!"

The girl smiled, but gave a woman's deeply puzzled gesture. "But why not hole up, Mr—?"

"Frazier, ma'am," he grinned. "They added the handle later." He glanced off at the breaking wall of gray, and she noticed the fatigue lines the storm had pulled upon his lean dark face. "Nothing has ever stopped me once I set my mind," he murmured.

HER face tipped obliquely as if she listened to the echo of his words and tone of voice. It was a thing many men had said, and to her knowledge it could lead them to very good or very foolish ends. If a man had a goal, such as her brother Bull, he used that

pride as a spur to drive himself through times when it looked right and easier to quit. If a man had no goal and was afraid to admit the weakness that meant, he could use the same idea to hide his weakness from himself. He could tackle anything hog wild, guns, storms or floodheads, for instance, to prove to himself how tough he was.

The Duke said abruptly, "But you shouldn't let yore sister get imposed on, Johnny. You must teach him, Miss Belle, that a man may be good friends with men he does not let his family meet."

So he had followed her on occasion and taken the trouble to learn her name! she thought, and felt the stirring of a woman's uncertain pleasure. Aloud, she said, "I've been raised with men, Mr. Frazier; I can judge them for myself."

"Then I'm really in dutch!" he grinned. She liked him for that. She laughed. She said, "I can judge them much better from their dancing than their shooting, though. Are you going to the Cattleman's dance tonight?"

"That," he said very soberly, "I have just decided to do if Johnny will side me."

Johnny's thin chest arched out. "Will I? You bet I will, pardner!"

The girl gave a little nod and lifted her reins. "We'll see you, then."

He touched his hat and watched them lift dust back to the cutoff. She rode sidesaddle, and she was a trim little dish, and she had class. A man could ride a long way and never meet another girl like that, and they were the top family on that range. Not many men around there could claim Belle Merritt for a friend; it would be fitting for the Iron Duke.

He flexed his broad back and sucked in a deep breath of self satisfaction, and then started his horse for town. "It was breasting Whitey in the ford that did it," he concluded. "Whatever they say when they're feeling respectable, it is the wild streak that gets them. They like a man tough if he can back it."

The Duke took it easy and timed his entrance to the town. They had heard, obviously, of his fight at Quatro, and that he was returning today, and more than usual would come in to hear the story. He could, of course, had ridden back with Charley Watrous, but that was in mid-week and the story would wear before he got an audience.

The town was old for a cow town. It had been a mission and a fort and something of a trade town, and ten or twelve big oak and 'dobe haciendas sat back aloof and forbidding and austerely respectable. Coming into town he had never passed them without being conscious of them, irritated by their aloofness and what it stood for, the complete unconsciousness of the owners that the Iron Duke was an important item on that landscape. Most of those houses belonged to wealthy ranchers, but in some were people so poor that they had sold most of their furniture and could not decently buy a drink, yet never once had they shown their respect for him, or that they even gave a damn if he was in town.

The best kept of the row was the Merritt house and, crossing its deep shadow, he gave it a man's arrogant, but not quite certain, smile, and sucked in a deep breath of its shrubs. Maybe in a week he would be going in there for supper, yet even thinking that, he shut the thought out from himself. His vanity would not let him admit that, had he desired it, he was not invited there or right next door any time he wanted.

He passed the block and the long empty space of a street that was slowly growing out this way with stores, and came abreast of the blacksmith shop, with the crowded square dead ahead. In the center of the square was a derelict cottonwood that lived from the horse trough's overflow. Its branches were half lost now in the moil of dust from the disorderly traffic of Saturday evening. The town was jammed already; he couldn't have asked for a better audience.

That crossed his mind and brought him straighter and more arrogant in the saddle and his hand doubled into a fist upon his hip. But his mood was suddenly thin and sour. The shadows of those big houses had settled over him.

Crandall, the blacksmith, lifted a red hot shoe and wigwagged in the deep shadows beyond his door. The Duke nodded, but without exuberance, and turned along the square. A cowprod recognized him and sent his high pitched yell across the town, "Yahoo! Here's the Iron Duke back from Quatro, looking tougher than a catamount!"

The town poured to the edges of walks and stoops, and some lounger at the hotel ran out groveling for the mere privilege of taking his horse to Murray's stable for him. There were calls and grins and jokes, and the fawning homage of the herd gathered force and flowed toward him. He felt it and it brought a faint high-handed smile to his lips, but the feel and the elation it gave a man were wearing thin. He cursed inwardly as he moved through the crowd that would have gathered around him. A man was entitled to the respect he whipped out of the world, and to a sense of self-satisfaction when he got it. But he was filled with corroding and bitter restlessness, and at the moment, he would have chucked all the fame and glory for beans and sourbelly on range with the old man.

He gave a few curt nods, a few brief words,

and moved stiff-legged into the deep shadows of the lobby. The clerk handed him his key with a complimentary grin, and started to say something, and then catching the Duke's black look, closed his mouth. The Duke ordered a bath and went up to his room. Sundown cut a flaming crimson yellow picture in his window, and without lighting a lamp, he picked up a cigar and moved there to look out and smoke.

CHAPTER THREE

Tin God

THE girl was in his thoughts, but dim behind the more important thoughts of himself. He should have felt like a million dollars and he knew it. Hell, he had been living for this, planning it with anticipation, ever since the powder smell cleared off at Quatro. It was one more feather, a new reason for the crowd to sing its praises of the Duke. On top of it, he'd had luck to prove his toughness further. The storm, filled with sleet and stampedes and cataracts, and the hundred dangers a range rider knew; the floodhead, and witnesses to tell about it: his turning Whitey Roark around; Belle Merritt's invitation. Damn it, he was going to be the Big Talk around there for a month with homage crowded at him, and to greet it, he felt sour as a pickle.

He put a light to his cigar and stood there drawing deeply of it and not even tasting the smoke upon his tongue. The last of day died into dusk, and the wild mountains thrust their solid blue-black bulk up into the early stars. It crossed his mind that it had been a long time since he'd had reason to ride up into the land of wind and space and sky, and not since he'd quit the range and ranch for cards and guns had he ever felt the same full contentment in himself, the same full satisfaction at a simple meal and night's sleep.

The town's noise and smells and slackness suddenly came up to him and crowded on his irritation and brought the feel of the old days riding range with his father back doubly sharp. He'd had a lot of respect for the old mustang even if they didn't see eye to eye, and he would have ridden home a dozen times down the years, except for his burning pride.

He could still smart at the old man's parting remark, "You'll be no damned good until you've choked on dust and learned that quick gun of yores don't make you any bigger than the next man by itself. You need to be smashed and busted loose of that Gawdamighty picture of voreself, and made to see just what a wuthless piece of flesh you are. Then if you can stand on yore feet again and come home humbly, yore plumb welcome. I'll know then I got me a man for a son and not a trigger happy jaybird who never saw a sundown because he was looking at his own shadow."

He hadn't forgotten a syllable or a tone. Ten years later, standing here with a whole county waiting for him to come down so they could crowd for his company, the old man's words still drew him taut and brought a cold dampness to his brow. The old man had been set in his ways and his ideas, and stubborn as a mule, and insisting on that to himself, the Iron Duke sought for some definite item in his life the success of which the old man would have grudgingly approved.

He thought of the girl, and his throbbing strain snapped. He didn't think of her as the girl, but as Belle Merritt, sister of the range boss in that country, but however he thought of her, she was the trick. She was the draw card that would have made his father push across the pot. His pa would have said that no man could get a woman like that unless he rated her, and hell, hadn't he read the look she couldn't fight out of her eyes that afternoon?

The boy knocked with his bath and put up a light in the big four lamp chandelier, and stripping down to flesh that had not lost all of its hardness and dark burn yet, he scrubbed himself half raw in a helluva good mood. The girl was what he had been missing; the physical sign to the world that proved the rightness of his philosophy and way of life, the stature of himself. Belle Merritt was not somebody whom any drifting saddle tramp with a guitar could sashay with; she was a thoroughbred. Beside that, she had a scorching heat in her he'd wager for the man strong enough to take her, and the Iron Duke was just that kind of man!

He shaved and slicked himself down like a damned dude, and picking his fanciest shirt and braided trousers, cleaned his gun to a spot, and donned the new broadcloth coat that fitted his broad shoulders like a glove. He could hear his name being boomed by men down upon the street, stray bits of rumor and all that is added to it, of his latest affray at Quatro. The crowd was growing impatient, and he could feel its keen interest and fickle hero worship reaching clean up to his room; he stood off, surveying himself in a full length mirror, the only one in the hotel, and his self importance came up through him with the solid surge of fighting blood. He was a damned tough man and he had proved it and he knew it. Only a fool would fail to know when he was tops of everything there was!

He moved down to the lobby, poised, balanced, in flowing rhythm . . . dude dapper and dandy, but sure of himself as a show horse, trim as a trotter, and dangerous as a derringer. There was no censor, no rawhid-

ing remarks in the suddenly fixed crowd. Gun kings were a thing above and apart from normal folk, the gladiators of the cattle country, whose tastes and vanities were petted and admired unless another fighter of equal note desired the opportunity to get his head blown off.

Upon the lower turn, the Iron Duke paused, head high, eyes flashing, a faintly condescending smile upon his lips. He looked out over them with the impersonal pride a rancher would take in his cattle. Here and there he let the cynical amusement of his scorn sober while his lips framed a word or he dropped a nod.

Suddenly, somebody lifted a hoarse cheer, and the crowd lifted its ripping roar to shake the rafters. It was the signal for the whole town to flock to the hotel. By immemorial custom, four of the town's huskiest men shouldered through the crowd and formed to wedge a passage for him, and if necessary take on any young toughs with glory in their eye but without the notches or reputation to meet the Iron Duke's class.

The Duke moved like an island through the calling, whistling, cheering throng, their homage washing against him like infinite small waves upon a beach. The Duke moved into the bar and took position where he could watch all doors, and torn between gloom of loss and cheer of profit to follow, Carlton, who owned the hotel, greeted the jostling crowd, "First drink on the house!"

This was not a custom of the house with any crowd, but special homage extended to the worshippers of the Duke. It was a reflection of the Duke's importance, and in a manner of speaking, it was the Duke distributing largesse, and the crowd took it that way and cheered him instead of Carlton.

The bar filled immediately with the noise of many voices and scrape of feet, the smell of whiskey slopped into stale sawdust, the odors of tobacco juice and twisted black cigars, of horsemen's clothes, and horsemen's sweat. Smoke spread in layers clean down to the floor, finally thickening into a haze, blue grey as heavy mist.

Carlton beamed, "Some crowd, Duke!" and struck an angle iron for silence. "Give ear!" he commanded. "And hear the Iron Duke's own story! He tells it only once and only those will hear it who are in this room!"

The barkeep nodded at some of his huskies who forced closed the big doors and crossbarred them. Carlton's statement was not quite accurate, but it made good publicity. Expectant silence held the room, and the Duke waited like an actor until he felt it reach explosion. Then he turned, and with planned and practiced modesty, said clearly, "Well boys, it was this way. . . ."

HE HAD learned the value of purity and under statement; let the retelling take care of the flourishes. He told of the card game at Quatro, of the false play from a cold deck, of placing his hands upon the edge of the table and commanding the dealer to drop the deck. An unsuspected accomplice to his gun side had reached for his armpit, and the Duke had sent the table at them. Three derringers were barking at him as he rolled to position with his gun free.

"You boys can figure that yoreselves," he told them. "Some of those pepperboxes run nine shots. None less than five. An over-under two shot is made for .38 or .44 but a tinhorn will more likely load it up with buckshot. That was, at tops, twenty-seven shots from three sides coming to my six. But buckshot was peppering around like hailstones, so I'll cut the odds to three to one."

He paused dramatically, and the crowd sucked in a breath. He told them, briefly, of the lights smashing out, the bystanders crowding for the door, the gunsmoke getting so heavy it brought tears to his eyes. The big mirror went down with a crash, there was so much lead flying. One of the tinhorns yelled with pain, then a second. They had some signal, and while he was reloading, they made a break and reached their saddles. They stampeded the racked horses and there was confusion—probably with the help of friends—or he would have followed.

"But where they stood," he added grimly, "while hitting leather, the dust was soaked to mud with blood. At least one will not get far, and I would bet two are found in the spring thaws."

It was a dramatic scene, and for an instant, utter silence held them. The Duke swung back to the bar and reached for the bottle. The coming cheer was building up through the crowd like a thunderclap. In that utter silence, the pressure of it literally shook the air.

Then Whitey Roark's flat, metallic voice cut in, "There is only one thing to that story I didn't catch, Duke," he drawled from down the bar. "What happened to the stakes and money?"

The crowd's pent-up breath expelled like a wild wind. Instinctively, the line of men who had fought to get to the bar now fought to wedge back. Tension sparked, and then was cut by Bull Merritt's amused boom, "Why, Whitey, I heard tell the Duke answered you to yore face, and yore face was green as a new tomato, when he crowded you back under the floodhead at Arroyo ford."

For an instant, the mocking smile on Roark's pale, soft face froze; the color of his eyes turned pure white. He had not expected the Duke to get sided, even with humor, from the Merritt quarter, and he was taken aback

at how, in this space of time, Merritt might have heard the story. Or anyone for that matter. It was a story, which due to his being in the wrong, the Duke himself would not tell until time had confused responsibility. The cattle country did not like even its gun kings with an arrogance that demanded right of way in the face of floods.

Whitey could have told that, but he was not anxious to have the whole story out. He was less anxious to insinuate any of the Merritts might be a liar, if such was the case. He put the best front he could on things, his face inscrutable. He waved a hand and said, "Why yes, I reckon he did, but that flood was making a dingdong racket, Bull!"

He let no truculence, nor rancor show in his voice. In that crowd and with the stampede that would have happened, he had his tough boys primed for trouble, but he was too calculating and shrewd to build a challenge fight. But the laugh had started and the questions were popping and he had to say something to save face.

And so he raised his glass toward the Duke and called, "A debt I owe you, Duke; a deep one."

The Duke's lips flattened and he put a narrowed gaze down the bar. "What kind of a debt, Whitey?" he asked softly. "Let's get that straight now."

Whitey Roark tossed off his drink and gave his cool, false smile. "All of his life a man wants to know, and is usually scared to look and find out, exactly what he's like inside. Most aren't lucky enough to find out until they start the long trip into Eternity. A gun fight is too fast play. Mebbe sometimes the instant of a big wager as a card is turned, or a stampede coming down atop of you, might show a man."

He poured another drink, and the crowd noted the steadiness of his hand. A flood trap had left some of them, and tough ones, shaking for days and they thought of that.

He looked up at the Duke with his easy smile again, and only the Duke saw the malicious mockery in his eyes. "I keep out of the way of stampedes and I always win a blue sky bet. So today was the first chance I've had to see my insides, Duke. I saw 'em clear as daylight in that boiling floodhead."

He lifted his glass and drank it slowly. " 'Course, you were up the bank by then," he added.

The Duke was checkmated and he had to fight to hold a scowl from his face. The demand for details was like a raw smell in the crowd, but they would not get them, unless they got them out of Johnny Merritt. In the meantime, he could feel the crowd's knowledge of the Mogollon storms and the sudden treachery of floodheads shift its fickle tribute to the gambler. Whitey Roark, too, had that feeling.

He had his own drink and asked casually, "How did you look to yoreself, Whitey?"

"No worse," the gambler chuckled, "than my gal has always claimed!"

Humor ran through the crowd and broke the tension, and both men turned the crowd on Bull Merritt for details of the incident. Bull Merritt could build a tall story out of an anthill and confuse the devil, which he now did. It left the town guessing, but it put both men up for ridicule and condemning rumor, and before the crowd got between them, they had looked at each other with bleak murder.

Bull Merritt had his fun and then shouldered through to the Duke's side, grinning, "My sister don't like corpses showing up at her parties."

The Duke gave him a flat, questioning look, but found no slightest trace of animosity in the young range boss. He looked amused over the whole incident, and in no anger that the Duke had spoken to his sister. The Duke soaked in the deep sense of inward satisfaction that mounted into a silent question of arrogance, "Why should he mind?" But he had one vague instant of decency and told Bull, "She did not actually invite me. Mebbe she just thought I would be there anyway."

"You will," Bull said with conviction. "I'm taking you with me before this crowd begins pulling yore clothes off for souvenirs!"

THE two men moved out through the calling crowd, with Carlton booming, "He'll be right back, gents! All them that want to shake the hand that shot up three cardsharps at Quatro had better wait. You can leave, but nobody can get back in."

Bull chuckled and moved with his stiff range gait down the steps and ploughed through the hilarious throng outside. They left the bars and glaring lights and crowd and angled across the thick dust of the square. Bull stopped to pump a mouthful of water at the trough, and stood aside to let the Duke do the same.

The Duke surprised Bull with a look of perplexed speculation on his face. He stood erect and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His back was stiff and his hackles rising and he said bluntly, "You don't like gun hands on the home range, Bull. Why are you taking me to the party?"

Bull dropped a mask of good humor across his face. He chuckled, "I carry a gun myself, Duke, and I could notch it if I were minded."

"But you aren't," the Duke stated. "That is the difference between us."

Bull made a gesture. "On our range, a man stands on what's inside of him, or goes down.

We're not skittish of a man who lives by the gun. But we might shy from a man who can't live without one." He gave the Duke a frank look of undecided judgment. "Fair enough?"

"How do you decide?" the Duke grunted.

"Oh, something always turns up," Bull growled. "You didn't plant that storm now, but you rode through it. You didn't know Whitey would be crossing that ford, but you busted him out of the way. Savvy?"

"No, I don't savvy," the Duke said. "What does it prove?"

"That's what I'm waiting to find out," Bull said honestly. He breathed a chuckle and let the subject drop. "But my sister is waiting, and that will prove hell and high water if I don't get you there!"

They moved on through the block of thick shadows from the closed warehouses and reached the cattle pens where the big shed had been fixed up for the dance. The rangelord's young brother came darting out from a clutter of carriages, yipping at Bull, "You hogtied him in record time, Bull!"

The Duke said, "He's a big man, fella! But you and me, we've got to have words about you telling stories out of school!"

Johnny shook his head in denial. "Sis told him. Honest, Duke! And she didn't ease the rope, either!"

Bull stopped and put a hand upon the Duke's arm. He said, "It is personal, or can you tell me yore run-in with Whitey?"

The Duke spat and rolled his long lip against his teeth, and looked at the ground. "It is not personal," he answered. "But I have nothing to tell."

"You lose any money to him?" Bull growled.

"No," Duke said. "And I don't aim to. But I don't like his face."

Bull grinned. He said, "One of these days somebody will change that for him! He wears a hard case, though, and it is tough to crack. I would like to see what spills out if anyone ever does break him open."

"Mebbe," the Duke growled, "we can arrange that right soon!"

"Watch yore back, friend!" Bull warned and they moved into the circle of brilliant light and noise.

They had to pass through a gate that cautioned, "Check your gun." Bull had been drawn into a knot of ranchers, and the Duke stared at the sign in irritated puzzlement. He could lord it over the bars and small fry in town, but the rancher owners were a different matter. At the same time, that gun rack was a long way out of reach and thick with guns, and if some trigger happy kid or old enemy drifted by, he might be put in the ridiculous position of having to run from pillar to pillar or even dance. It was even possible he might be shot! Yes, by God, even shot!"

He looked beyond the gate and saw there was dancing in the other room, but the floor had been run straight through the big double doors and filled a pen outside. Waddies and kids were hanging on the corral bars, and he said to Johnny. "You taking root out yonder?"

The boy nodded.

"How about wearing my gun so I can get it if I need it?" he suggested. "That sign don't go for you."

"Pardner!" the boy breathed. "You going to let me do that, wear it out there, plain and clear for all to see?"

The Duke grinned. He really liked the kid. Sometimes it had crossed his mind that if Johnny were an orphan he'd take him and they'd drift home and breast the old man, and to hell with guns and glory, they'd go to ranching. Given attention, that kid would grow into the best damned rancher in the whole southwest. He was only nine, but he was worth two ordinary cowprods already; there was nothing he wouldn't tackle, nothing that he missed. He thought of that now, and he thought, yes, damn it, for a kid like that, a man would turn back and crawl in dust and eat humble pie.

He unstrapped the gun and handed it to the boy, and Johnny let out an Injun whoop of joy. Bull turned, and cut sign on what was taking place, and came across with the smile gone from his face. He was the range boss and he was head of the Merritt clan, and for the first time, he let the Duke feel that inflexible authority.

He said gruffly, "Duke, no Merritt holds another man's gun!"

The Duke's face stiffened. "Johnny and me been friends," he pointed out.

"We'll side a friend," Bull grunted. "But with our own gun, Duke."

For a moment, the two men stood there with their wills clashing, not wishing to affront each other, but neither willing to give an inch. The Duke's temper was rising and he was considering leaving, when he caught a flash of a dream in green and Belle came through the gate. She caught the tension and where another girl would have stood off or busted in, she smoothed it with a high humored, "So you drygulched him, Bull?"

"Well, not so dry," Bull grunted and humor tugged at the corners of his stern lips. "But we seem to have a problem over getting him in the chute."

The girl looked up at the Duke, and he caught the personal interest in her eyes and the nearness of her; warmth spread out from her and wrapped him in. She said with a sureness to her brother, "Well, stop yore bellowing long enough to let him think. He'll figure something."

It was that easy. The instant she said it, the Duke's anger ebbed and he chuckled, "Why sure 'nough. Johnny, you ain't just holding that—I'm giving you that gun!"

Bull's massive head swung and outright amazement was on his face. "You're *what?*" he rasped unbelievingly, and then seeing it was meant, he turned purple with embarrassment beneath his range burn. He said, "Doggone it, I didn't mean . . . uh . . . mmmm."

Johnny asked, wide-eyed, "Can't I keep it, Bull?"

"Why sure you can if the Duke gave it to you as a friend," he growled. "But damn it, I didn't mean to make him—" He broke off and looked awkwardly from the boy to the Duke and to the girl.

Belle said sweetly, "You aren't safe off that north ten thousand acres, Bull, but I reckon you have to live up to yore name!"

"All right!" he growled. "But you make it right, Belle." He scowled, seeking words for having forced this play, and then gave it up with a wild gesture. The girl laughed and took the Duke's arm, and the Duke winked at the pop-eyed kid and moved through the gate. The boy was already in a key spot on the back corral bars when the Duke swung the girl past the big doors.

She followed the Duke's gaze and said, "Bull didn't mean to do that!"

"I'm glad he did," the Duke muttered out of his running line of thought. "I wouldn't have thought of it myself. Look at that kid's face!"

"Why Duke!" the girl murmured with surprise and drew off a little to study him. "Is there room in your for liking somebody else?"

He looked down at her and his gaze held her's like a snare. "I'm here," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whip Hand

SHE darkened, but the judge called for a change of set, and she was whipped off into another square. They danced that out and the feel of her was a firm warm softness in his arms that did not leave him even when she was not there. He had been down on the desert and needed water; he had been down on his luck and needed a fist fight; he had been blizzard holed and needed food. But he had never had a hunger nor a thirst like this. He had never known another woman he thought a man might miss. She had put fire in his veins and nothing would bank the flames but her lips. She was something he had to have, come hell and high water, in order to regain his self composure.

She saw it, and did not shy from it or play dumb. She let him see she saw it, and a woman's smile of deep inward pleasure was on her face, and breathing came hard and fast.

He lost her for the next two dances, and not knowing any of these rancher women, moved out to the shed where they had set up the men's bar. Here and there he sensed outright truculence directed at him, but mostly it was not that so much as an unspoken opinion that he was out of place. He could feel it coming in waves against his back, and he reacted with arrogance and stood alone with a manner akin to contempt. They were glad to know him at a bar or poker table, but did not want him with their women, the nerve of the damned slaving cow masters!

He heard the rumble of a remark he did not catch, and turning slightly, saw a second rancher make a man's accepting gesture and say, "He came with Bull. As far as I'm concerned, that's enough for me."

"And the rest of us, whether we like it or not! Bull must be out of his head, or does he think it's funny?"

"Why don't you ask him?" a wicked humored rancher grinned.

The first man gave him a hot look. His jaws clamped like a vise and he moved away.

The Duke showed no sign of resentment, but he was scorching about it inside. One of the other Merritt boys had drunk too much, and pride kept him from speaking, but anger had put a dark light in his eyes, Whatever Bull's reasons for bringing him, it was on approval; he had not come to a judgment on the Duke, and he had not accepted him as a friend. But by God, he had the girl roped up, and by the looks of things, it was Belle Merritt who held the whip on this range!

He felt irritated and ill at ease, but had too much stubborn pride to leave, and between dances with the girl, he drank more than he ordinarily would. He was not drunk, but the liquor loosened his resentment, and it took the form of a flaunting boastfulness when men began to prod him on his run-in with Whitey at the ford.

What he said was carried straight across town, of course. The ranchers were coming and going, milling back and forth between poker games and bars and their own dance. Word came of a big game running over at Whitey's. At supper time, two ranchers came in a little taut of face, and shortly word was running around that between them, they had dropped four thousand dollars.

These ranchers were big men without exception, rough and brusque and primitive of feeling, and with the direct openness and self assurance of the feudal cattle caste. He was a man whom they might have hired and even befriended and admired in that capacity, but he was beyond the rigid barriers of their code and they resented his being on equal terms.

More and more as the night wore on he felt it. Attributing it to his living by his guns, he flaunted his gun handiness, met contempt with scorn, and self contentment with his arrogance.

It was, he saw, the same old pattern in different colors as the build up for a fight. He had thrown a challenge they were not ready to take up, but would not forget. The word had been said, and the word was his presence on the scene, and it was a matter now of making his word law . . . breaking their resistance like brush mustangs, the rough way . . . or of being frozen out of their midst and off that range.

Deciding that, he began a veiled but systematic campaign of insolence. It was a gunman's way, and by God, it worked, for nobody breasted him, but they shied off. It needed only the capping proof that he held the whip and he got his chance when Belle Merritt asked him to see her home.

"Shall I get Johnny?" he asked, and saw the quick dilation of her eyes. She shook her head. "No. This is his big night each year. He'll go to sleep and one of the boys will carry him home."

He took her out under the eyes of scowling ranchers who did not dare speak, and in his mood of arrogance, he interpreted this as subservience to him. It did not occur to him that he was tolerated as the Merritt guest; the knowledge was there, but it was dim and he kept it from himself.

THE moon had been full and just dropped beyond the sensuous roll of the black hills; soft gray clouds lay like lips upon the star washed sky. There was a very low breeze, warm with desert night and threaded with the keen, cruel desert smells. The girl's nearness wrapped him like a mist, and the uncaptured fire within her darted out and struck his raw manhungers like lightning.

They came into her yard and she mounted the shallow steps onto the porch and turned. An opalescent light was in her eyes. Her lips were a little parted and had the soft, full roll of one waiting to be possessed, and the rise and fall of her breast was quick.

He reached out and put a hand upon her hip, and knew she had a last moment of indecision, and that it flamed, and flickered out. Had he not been angered by the actions of the ranchers, the impact might have been different. But now his mood was cruel and savage, and Belle was not so much a woman he wanted as a woman he had to break. He had to make her crawl and whimper for him as a sign that he was equal . . . better . . . than any man of her own caste.

He brought her to him, his mouth hungry and vicious upon her lips; the grip of his hands cruel as iron bands. He felt her give and give with violence, and deep within him the vain demon laughed. Then suddenly his passion was left without response. She had cut the burning flame within her. It was beyond anything physical, beyond revulsion, beyond outrage . . . he would have felt the same to find her vanished.

He set her down and stood back glaring and breathing hard with a raw pride. He had shown his hand and did not have the high card, and now his head hung forward and he waited like a fighter who is licked but will still stand for the anger and the slap he knew would come.

Her face formed a pale oval against the dark, but searching it, he found no signs of any of the things he expected. She was keyed, and yet fully composed, and only a faintly bitter amusement pulled at the broad bow of her mouth.

She said with the coolness of her wisdom, "If you would take what you were asking for the way you were giving it, it would be something pretty cheap and worthless, Duke. You'll find something about your class down at the Bella if you want it . . . being a hero, the girls probably won't even take yore money."

A sound of fierce anger and denial broke from his chest, but it failed to touch her in any slightest way. She merely added with enormous puzzlement, "It is a funny thing Johnny likes you," and dropping her eyes with dismissal, turned away.

He watched her move through the shadows and fade inside, and stood their fiercely waiting for the last insult, the bang of the door. But Belle Merritt would not let herself get that out of hand. He barely heard it close, and she would not stoop to ram home the bolt.

He went dead white, and cursed, and wheeling, strode down to Whitey's bar. He stood there black of face and with raw mayhem in his eye, and the smell of his fury kept all comers from him. He stood with head hung forward and his eyes burning fire and drank without knowing, like a man who has been knifed and is holding in his stomach.

The games were breaking and men looked at him as they passed, but only one man paused. It was Crandall, the blacksmith, who would breast anything on feet, and taking his measure, Crandall asked from his barrel chest, "Duke, you know where you are?"

The Duke rasped a sound for answer.

"You want to stay?" Crandall went on unperturbed

"I mean to stay," the Duke snapped. "I am going to be the last one out of here . . . or Whitey!"

Crandall's eyes broke momentarily with light. He hesitated, and then grunted, "Well, yore business, but you have had a tough day and no sleep, friend!" and moved out into the

night. He didn't even turn to look back.

The Duke threw down another drink and then took in the room. Two housemen, two idle dealers, the barkeep, Whitey, and two grim faced ranchers. One of the ranchers tossed in his hand and cursed. The other saw Whitey's cards and grunted, "Me too! But don't sell that mortgage, Whitey, or I'll skin you!"

Whitey said softly, "I like the investment this way, Robb." Mockery filled his white lidded albino eyes as he watched the men take a last drink and spur drag, bad tempered, out the door.

The housemen had not moved and Whitey leaned forward on the green felt, softly riffling the cards. He put his attention upon the Duke, keening the small angles of his body, the way his weight sank upon his knees, sensing out the killing murder inside of him. After a space he signaled toward the lights, and as a houseman put them out, Whitey moved slowly up the bar.

He stopped carefully a full length from the Duke. He could see he was drunk and dead beat from his storm ride and some burning anger that had gutted him. But there was murder in his eyes, and in a gunman, drunk or not, murder was a thing to watch. He said speculatively, "You will be wanting something, Duke?"

THE Duke finished his drink and turned at right angles to the bar. His big frame wavered, and he had to catch balance with his elbow. He laid a grim and burning glare on Whitey and nodded. "Yeah, there is something I want. You. But first I want one of yore special cold decks . . . one that pairs the one I brought back from Quatro!"

Whitey's eyes flicked to the deck he had left on the table. He cursed, but his features remained inscrutable. "So you brought one back to match up, eh? Why didn't you bring the men you've told?"

"*Yo're* going to tell them!" the Duke grated. "Alive, or yore corpse will tell them with a deck found on you! Those were yore boys I shot up, Whitey!"

"That is harsh talk, Duke!" Whitey said. Without moving his eyes, he could see his housemen. But so could the Duke, and when one moved a finger in signal to Whitey, the Duke barked sharply, "Freeze, or I will shoot that damned hand off!"

The gambler gave a cool smile. "Not so drunk!"

"Not that drunk!" the Duke warned. He moved a half step out from the bar, and lurched, but caught himself. For a moment, he looked stupified with drunkenness and Whitey shifted balance, and in that split second, the Duke's gun hand flew.

His hand grasped air, and pressing, he felt the gunless muscle of his thigh. Whitey waited for the shot with a curious puzzlement breaking up through his fatalism, and almost simulaneously with the Duke, realized what the trouble was.

He gave a long, soft laugh that held the tone of a snake's hiss. "Why, damn it, Duke!" he chuckled. "Ain't it hell what a range gal will do to a man's memory!"

The inscrutable mask dropped from his face, leaving it evilly white and crazed with anger and vicious. He jerked his head at the housemen. "He forgot his gun! Move in on him, boys, but with your fists. Just rip him in pieces, but keep him up! I want him split wide open, but I want him to see it so he'll know I evened up my debt! I want him to get a good look and see his guts are yellow!"

The men moved in with brutal grins. Gut-stripping a drunk was just their meat! The Duke fought, but he could not fight the fatigue of that morning's crazy ride through slashing hail and hell and the drain of Belle utterly stripping and raking his arrogance and pride. In the midst of it, he had a blinding flash of insight . . . he had nothing left to fight for! He had aimed for the peaks, and the fall was all the way; his gun was gone, his fame was shot, his pride had been too poor a thing for Belle to even spit on.

For a bare instant, he rallied at memory of that full and undemanding instant she gave herself. Now he knew that he could have fought for Belle. But Belle was gone too, and what was left?

"He ain't even fighting now," he heard one of the toughs say.

"Keep working on him," Whitey muttered, and without seeing him through the bloody haze, the Duke knew his lips were slack and wet. "Take chairs and sit down if you want to, but keep working on him and keep him on his feet!"

At high dawn, Crandall walked down the street from a deadfall in company with Bull Merritt. Being curious about the crumpled figure sprawled beside the watering trough, they crossed and stopped. Crandall grunted with mixed appreciation and dismay, "Must be some pilgrim. But boy, I've never seen a job like this!"

"He's living," Bull rumbled. "But mebbe he won't want to!" He grabbed the figure's feet and Crandall took his head, and they doused the tattered mass of ripped and battered flesh, and sluiced some of the blood from the pulpy face.

They stretched him upon his back, and it was not until then that Bull blurted, "Good jeepers, it's the Duke and he stinks of booze!" He stood erect and looked at the blacksmith with rough frontier irony. "The Iron Duke, slopped up and robbed and beaten, and tossed

out here like some common drunken bum!"

Crandall scowled thoughtfully and stepped back a pace. Bull said, "I don't think it was any of my outfit, although he was asking for it, but we can't leave him here!"

Crandall shook his head negatively. "This was a private matter, Bull. He asked for it, he built it, and he got it . . . let him crawl out of it!"

Bull spat and scowled. "In a way, mebbe, it was my fault."

"This had nothing to do with you," the blacksmith grunted. "This was the coming of age of a prize skunk."

"He gave my brother his gun," Bull said.

Crandall nodded. "I know. Likely he forgot it. But without it, there wasn't much man there, was there? He has four-flushed the world and kidded himself, and last night he got tangled and called his own bluff."

Crandall used the toe of his boot to lift the man's face into the increasing gray and yellow light. There was no flicker of the battered eyelids. "You can't beat a man that bad who has enough guts left to crawl," he said with harsh and realistic judgment. "I wasn't there, but I can guess what happened. When he found his gun gone and his pride had fallen, he got a good look at himself and found nothing there worth fighting for and quit."

Bull met the blacksmith's righteous but ruthless eyes. *"Whitey?"*

Crandall shrugged. "Whitey owed him a debt. Mebbe this was it."

THEY gave the fallen Duke a final look, not of sympathy, but of marvel he had managed the bluff so long, and then wheeled and spur dragged off for their houses. Others drifted by from the late night and stopped to look and pass their harsh or coarse or bitter judgment, and before sunup the word had gotten out and men were even riding into town. The crowd was fickle, and did not forgive its idol having feet of clay, and those who had cheered last evening, came to jeer today. Heartache and insult and vengeance lay in many, and in some, memory of broken fortunes and irreparable shame from the Duke's arrogance, and in others, broken bones. A few took their rancor out in lewd ways or taking a good kick at his body, and in all that town, the Duke had no friend to make them stop.

Young Warren Merritt drifted back from a look, and sitting down to breakfast, grunted cynically, "The gathering of coyotes! A man needs to see that to see what yellow gutted back-stabbers the herd is."

The girl paused at the stove, a taut stillness on her face, lost in thought so long she nearly burned the flapjacks. She whipped them over, and turned suddenly, saying, "Johnny . . ."

Bull said, "He went out swallowing a hot potato. He has to learn the hard way too. Let him be and he'll cry it off."

But Johnny was crying it off in a different way. He was down at the horsetrough, blubbering in jerks and spasms, but with that beautifully oiled and tooled gun cocked upon the crowd. They had grinned when he came up and started to include him in the grim joke, but he had whanged the sole clean off Scrooze Wizer's boot, and the grins were thinner now. In time, somebody tried to drop a loop upon him, and the kid put such a professional crease in that wise jaspar it dropped him unconscious

"This is my country, gents—where the owlhoot trail runs straight and narrer an' a man ain't innocent till he's dead!"

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and yet somehow undamaged from his horse.

"You lay off Duke now!" the kid blubbered at them wildly. "And get back off there to the sides of the square! This was his gun and he taught me to shoot and he was my friend. And I'm his friend until he can crawl out hisself!"

The kid meant it, and the crowd edged off and was standing around foolishly when Bull came storming down the street. He took in the picture, and called angrily, "You damned little scamp, you get home!"

Bull's hat flew off as the gun barked and he stopped dead. The kid bawled at him, "You, too, Bull, you wave around! You got him to gimme this gun for keeps, and it's mine, and I can side him with it like a Merritt and I aim to!"

Bull wiped the sudden humor from his lips and looked bug-eyed at the crowd. "Reckon he means it," he grunted. "Ain't nothin' much I can do." He started away, and then swung back and added without the least humor, "But there is something I can do to any smart outfit that starts messing with him!"

That about ended the show and the crowd began to break and drift, and before long, all but a few were gone. The kid gave way then. He had been crying with anger, but now the heartbreak busted loose and he sat there, a nine year old kid who had backed off the whole damned ornery, hazing pack, and blubbered like his ma had just been killed.

That was the first thing the Duke realized sickly as he squinted open his puffed eyes. In the next second, memory and instinct brought all of the rest back. He could see the kid sitting on the trough with the gun across his thin bony knees, and his long gangling legs stretched out protectively over him.

The Duke gave a bitter smile and managed thickly with his broken lips, "You better vamoose now, old pardner. You've done all you can."

The kid's sobbing turned to a unbroken wail. Through it, he slobbered, "Doggone, Duke, and just when you almost made the grade! But then you had to go and give all that trash cause for what they're saying!"

"What are they saying, Johnny?"

The boy miserably shook his head.

A weary breath ripped out of the Duke. "It don't matter. I know." He was silent a long time. "What did yore sister say?"

The kid had dried up some by then. "Aw, she couldn't make sense of it," Johnny mumbled bitterly, "a fella can ride like you getting beat like some drunken bum!" Boylike, a random thought cut obliquely across his sorrow. "Gee, that was pretty, the way you brought yore hoss down the face of the mesa, Duke!"

A kind of startled wonder broke in the Duke's bloody eyes. Curiously, he asked, "That's what you and yore sister remember about me, Johnny?"

"Yeah," the boy nodded with tight set jaws. "Gee, we were friends for awhile . . . we got to remember the best about you, don't we?"

The Duke thought that over, and suddenly a terrible laugh sawed from his chest. The boy started and looked down with fresh worry. The Duke made a motion of his battered head. "I'm all right, Johnny. I was just thinking something funny. I spent ten fools years building up a gun name, but the best thing you'll remember of me is something my pa taught me when I was yore size!"

"You ever been back since?"

"No," the Duke muttered. "But I am going back and eat humble pie."

"Aw, don't talk that way!" the boy scowled. "What do you want to do, kill the old man with shame?" He wiped his eyes and blew his nose man-fashion, on his thumb, and screwed his face together in deep thought. "You couldn't ride this way anyhow," he considered. "And nobody goes up to that line shack thirty, and I could bring up some grub."

The Duke's lips pulled in a bitter smile. "We fork here, pardner! I don't want my friend mixing with my kind of trash!"

"You shut up now," the kid yipped. "If you can still turn down help, you got something inside you left somehow. And I've got another good gun I can give you to make up for this."

"Where did you get it, Johnny?"

"Aw, sis gave it to me for you, and I wouldn't bring it, but then I run out anyhow. Man gets kinda anger-tangled when a friend's done made such a fool of hisself!"

"She gave it to you . . . this morning?"

The kid nodded. "Why?"

"Why then," the Duke said, "I reckon I better crawl to that shack thirty and get healed and finish some business here before I drift!"

He shut his eyes and the driving throb in his head and the fierce aches through his body didn't mean much now. That was only his body, and there was something a lot bigger inside of that, and all of that bigness was filled with something new for him. The kid, and Belle, and riding back to see his dad. But that didn't mean he aimed to be plumb peaceful. They'd been pretty easy with him, these rough rancher hombres of the Tonto, and most of them had lost their shirts last night to Whitey. The money would still be in town in a week or so when he got well, and so would those cards, and when he waltzed into Whitey's next time, Whitey was going to give-and-get, or his neck was going to stretch!

"After all," he muttered with an ironic grin in his choked voice, "the Iron Duke can't skedaddle out without paying his debts!"

THE END

ONCE A REDSKIN—

By Jimmy Nichols

"AW, LEMME shoot the little redskin, why don't ya? He'll only starve to death or be chawed up by coyotes. Ain't you got no heart at all?"

The voice came from the rough, gravel throat of a hard-bitten regular army soldier. A veteran of a dozen campaigns against the Cherokees, he was of the mind that the only good Indian is one that's laid out stiff and cold, but he was feeling a mite squeamish about the way this one died. The papoose was only about three months old, and kind of cute with his unwinking black eyes and unusually light copper skin. A plucky kid, the trooper decided, and he deserved a break. He raised his side arm and took careful aim.

A brawny arm knocked up his gun hand. The soldier looked up in annoyance and then with respect as he caught the flash of gold metal on the officer's shoulders. A second later, Major Snider MacWilliams leaned agilely down off his horse and scooped up the silent Indian baby from the ground. The soldiers stood around in open-mouthed astonishment as he rode slowly off toward camp with the papoose tucked underneath his arm.

And that is how Thomas (Wind-on-a-horse) MacWilliams became the sole survivor of a cruel white raid on his native village where three hundred of his relatives were massacred in their tents beside the peaceful Washoe River.

If the major's men were astonished at his merciful act, his wife was nearly speechless. The major rode through the gate of his Oklahoma ranch about a week later and silently placed the infant in his wife's lap. She looked astonished and then indignant. The major held his breath. Then the papoose squirmed and clutched at the white woman's dress and suddenly her arms tightened around the foundling and the major relaxed. Mrs. MacWilliams had lost her own three children to "wagon fever"—in reality, typhoid—on the long trek West from Boston five years ago and she had been lonely for a long time.

Thomas MacWilliams—for the major formally adopted him and had him duly christened—grew up for the most part like any other ranch boy in the opening West. Carefully, his parents hid from him the facts of his savage birth. Many a white settler had half or quarter Indian blood, and Thomas' straight black hair and impassive eyes aroused no comment at the little prairie school he attended for ten years.

When the boy was sixteen his foster father decided to send him East to school. The major had retired some years ago, and the income from the ranch, plus his pension, was just enough to cover the expenses of higher education. Like most parents, Major and Mrs. MacWilliams were cheerfully willing to pinch pennies to see their child get through school. Off he went to old Boston College with a new suit and a shiny, round hat that rubbed his ears.

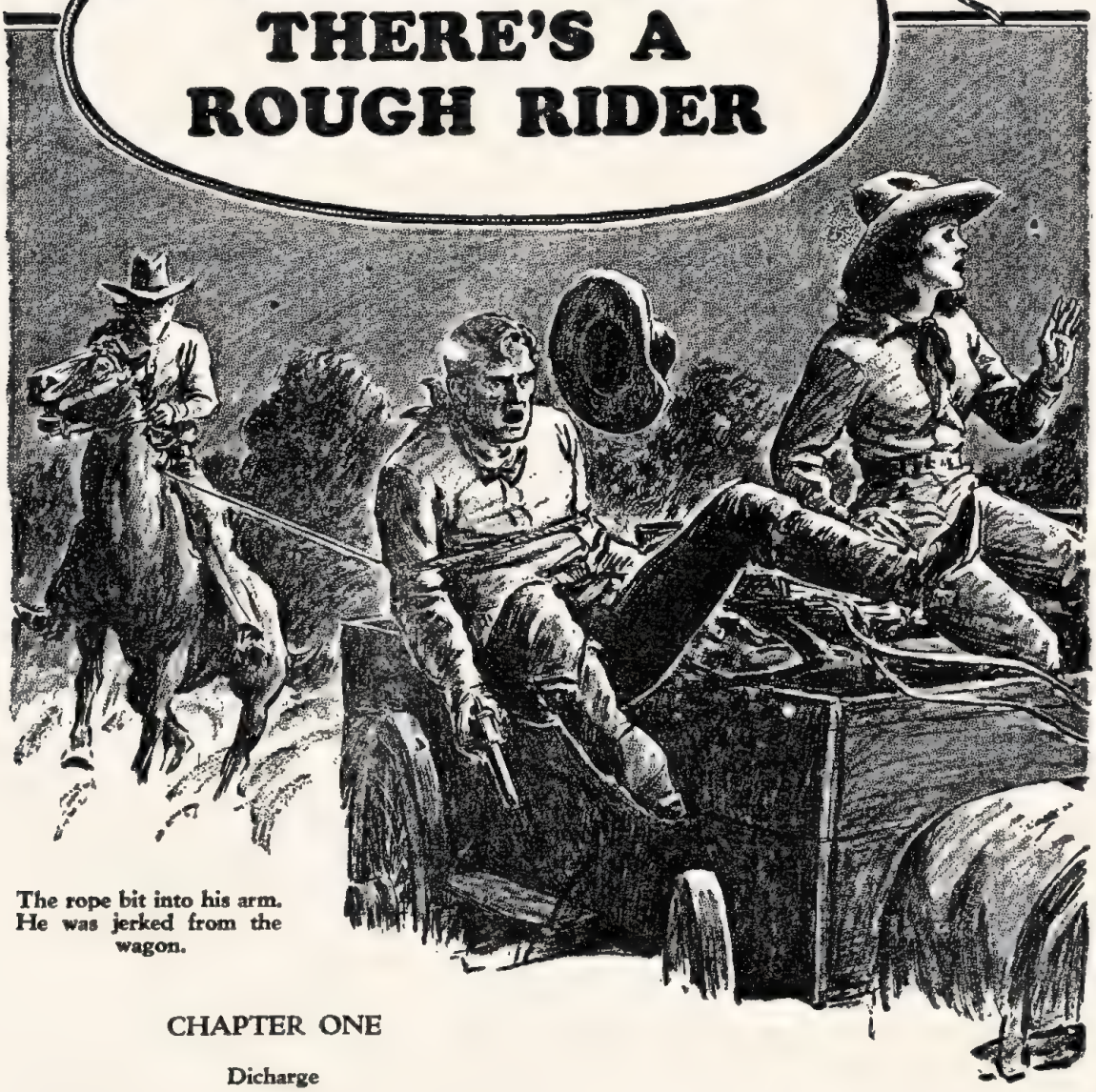
A year later, Mrs. MacWilliams was killed in a fall from her horse and the major, ill from shock, lay dying at the ranch. Weakly, he asked a neighbor to ride one hundred and fifty miles to the nearest telegraph station and wire his son to come home. And Thomas came, speedily, his face anguished with sorrow for his dead mother and concern for his dying father.

He was a fine looking man as he strode into the tiny ranchhouse, tall and straight. His father's heart leaped at the sight of him. In a year, his foster son had grown up. The major decided to tell the boy the truth about his Indian heritage. A wiser man now, the old army officer saw clearly the brutalizing effects of the Army's policies toward the Indians and realized that they had been driven to excesses of barbarism.

"Thomas," he whispered faintly, "listen to me. Your mother and I loved you as though you were our own son. Believe me. But I want you to know, perhaps some day for your own satisfaction, that your real mother and father were Cherokee Indians." Rapidly, with his last breath he sketched the story of the raid, sparing the white men in no detail.

(Please turn to page 128)

WHEREVER THERE'S A ROUGH RIDER



The rope bit into his arm. He was jerked from the wagon.

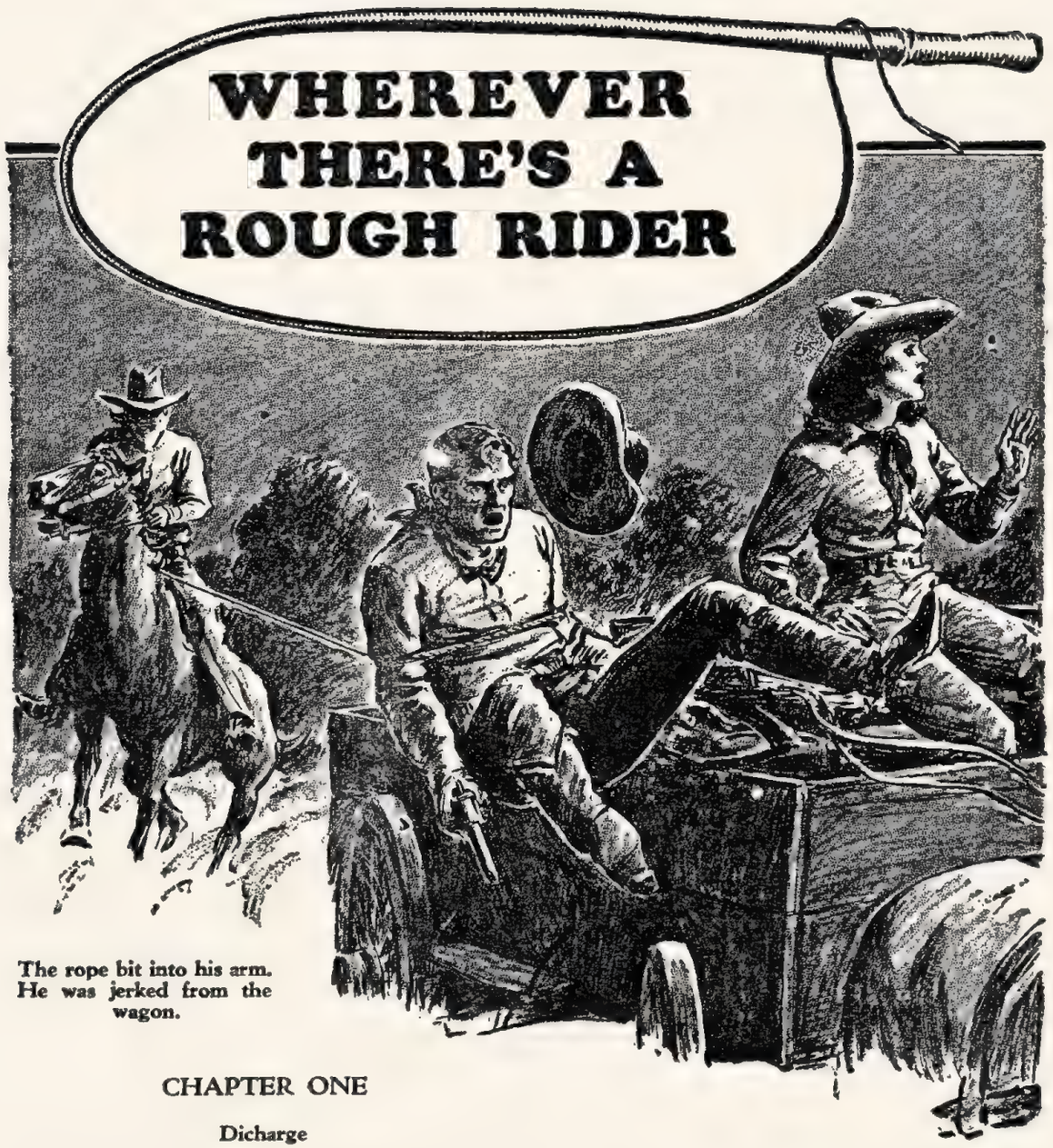
CHAPTER ONE

Dicharge

CLARK RAGAN'S train pulled into San Antonio on a scorching August afternoon. At Oren Waggoner's mercantile he shed his threadbare uniform and bought a range outfit, remembering to get shirt and trousers a size large; he knew he'd soon regain the pounds long months in the hospital had cost him. Next morning he took the I. & N. southward on the hundred-mile run which, after nearly two years, would bring him home.

A long-limbed, deliberate man with hazel eyes that had forgotten how to smile, he swung his battered valise along the aisle, paying no attention to the passengers. Madge Dunham stared at him as if he were a ghost, and he never even saw her. He picked a seat near the open rear door, and when he swung his valise up to the rack the effort made him cough.

For a man who never before had known a sick day, the cough was an annoyance; but he guessed he was lucky. And he knew he owed Luke Vastine his life. The Spanish bullet caught him half way up San Juan Hill, drilling through his chest and dropping him from saddle. Luke Vastine, second lieutenant under him, had come riding to snatch him



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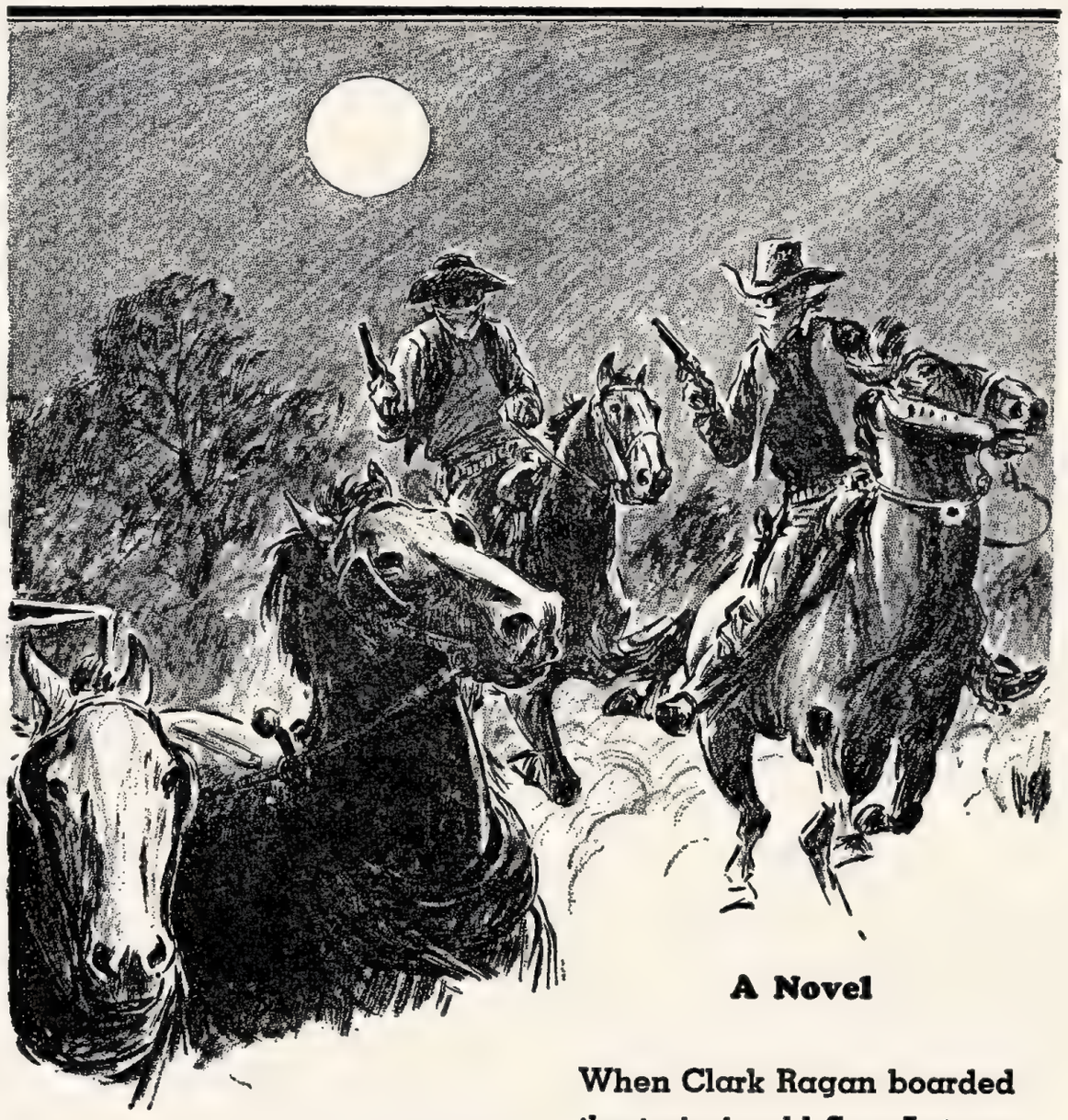

A Novel

When Clark Ragan boarded the train in old San Antone, he headed hell-for-leather for a home-grown, no-quarter cattle ruckus, deadlier than any he had ever fought in America's war with Spain....

from under the Spicks' noses, taking him back down the hill with the brown bully boys popping away at both of them.

Then, in the hospital, yellowjack had to sneak up on him! Those doctors claimed it was a miracle; yet, here he was, with only that little cough, his wolf-leaness and a yellow-soap look to his skin to remind him of the miseries he'd been through. A lot of Colonel Teddy's boys hadn't been so fortunate, especially with yellowjack.

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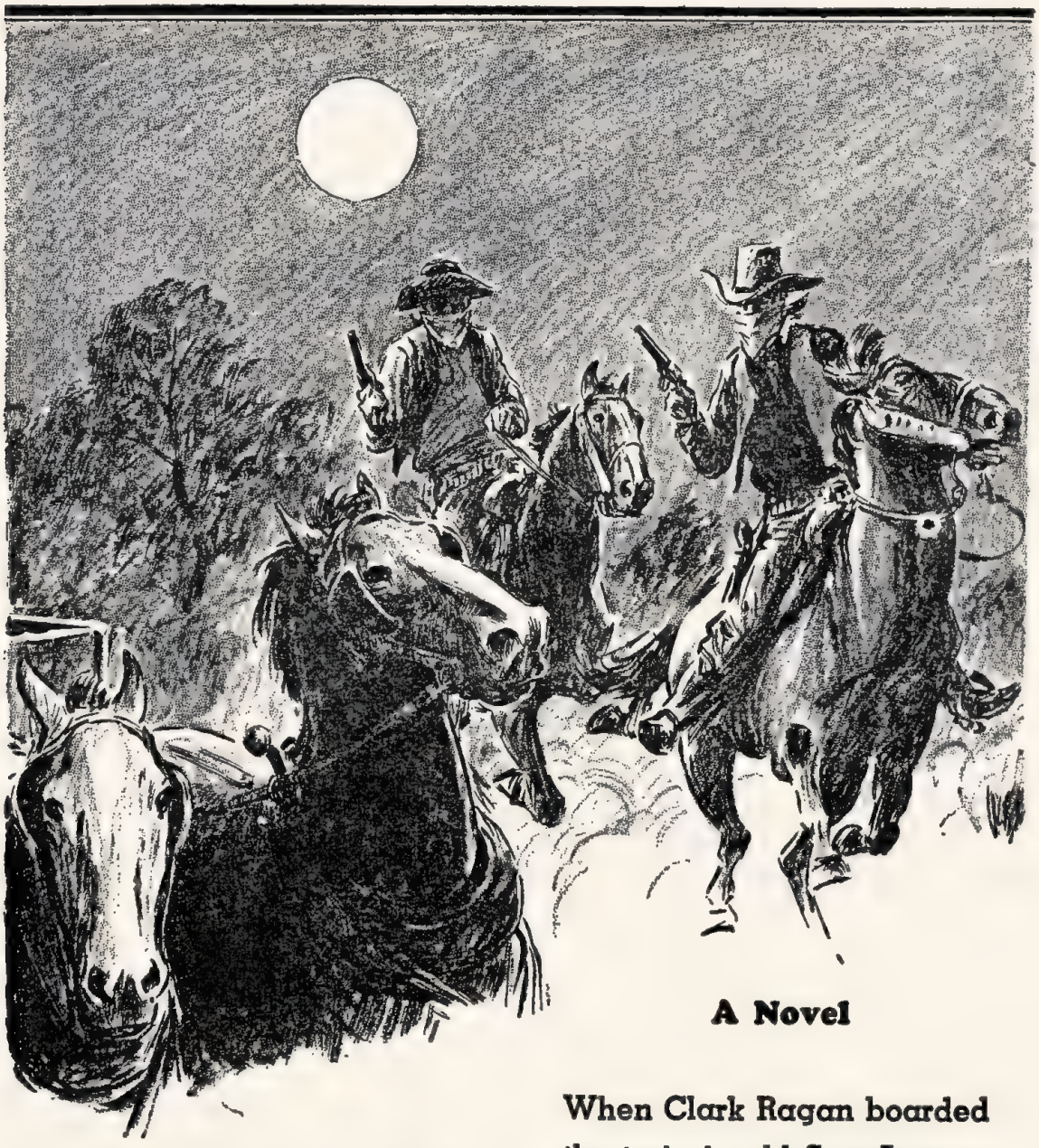

A Novel

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Through the window Ragan saw scattered adobes, dogs, goats and naked, brown-skinned children playing about them. This was the kind of thing he was used to; the kind of scene he had thought of on rain-drenched nights, with mosquitoes buzzing around his ears and water dripping from the mail-sack canvas of his tent. He looked out and took a deep breath and thought it the sweetest air a man might ever breathe. God, it was good to be home!

There were two things he had to do: First, after he got a bit more strength back, look up Vastine. A man will do queer things when the doctors tell him he's dying, yet his mind had been clear. He remembered that last time, before Luke sailed for Tampa, when Luke had come to the hospital. He remembered telling Luke about his cattle and the five thousand acres of curly mesquite grass he owned and the girl he had intended to marry.

Just thinking about Fay Yarber, then, and about all the things death would snatch from him, had brought a poignant ache in his throat. There was no one else he could ask, so he had made Vastine promise to carry out his wishes concerning Fay, the land and the cattle. Because he had no kin he had left everything he owned to Fay; he remembered scrawling his name on the paper Luke had made out. Besides that, there was his watch and the ring Fay had given him, and he remembered dimly hearing Luke promise to deliver those things. Well, Vastine was a fellow not likely to set his roots too deep in any spot, but Luke came from up El Paso way and he reckoned he could find him without much trouble.

Then it would be Fay and him! He didn't aim to rush her. It would take him maybe a few weeks to locate Luke, time enough for any girl to get ready in. Thinking back now, it seemed queer the way he had fiddle-footed around. Fay was too headstrong. Fay was too bossy. Thunder and lightning! Let death breathe down a man's neck a while, and he got a new set of values.

Clark Ragan sat there waiting with an impatience strange to him. When, up ahead, a bell began clanging and slack ran out of the couplings, he could forgive the engineer for the sharp jerk that rocked him back against the padded red plush and almost set him to coughing. This was the last short run. A hundred more miles—then he would be home.

Until her warm-toned voice was in his ears, Ragan didn't know Madge Dunham was on the coach, much less standing beside him.

"Clark! Don't you even remember old friends?"

SHE HAD a lot of chestnut hair, a short, straight nose, and brown eyes fringed by lashes so heavy and unruly they reminded Ragan of the wild, tangled Texas thickets. He hadn't seen this girl for two years and he realized, with something like a shock, that she had grown into a woman, with a lithe roundness to her limbs and a vitality about her that stirred a man's blood.

Sight of her brought back memories of a flat-breasted kid who tagged around after him whenever he dropped by Dunham's store. She would admire the striped candy in the glass case; the scum-covered barrel with its fat pickles never failed to draw her sigh.

Those were the danger-bright, gun-smoky days when long-horned Texas cattle went northward on their own iron-hard hoofs, thousands upon thousands of them. Those were the days when every Texas lad had his hero, whether it be Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok or Buffalo Bill. Barbed wire and "Remember the Maine!" were unheard of then, and brush country cattlemen like Richard King, Mifflin Kennedy or Branch Yarber could start with little more than nerve and a good horse and end up with a cattle kingdom.

This brush country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was the cradle of the Texas cattle industry, and those days big trail-driving outfits from the section outfitted at Walt Dunham's store, and he advertised "Everything from a Ratskin to a Ranch."

Clark Ragan, rising from his seat, remembered all the glamor and excitement which had stirred him and which sight of this girl had brought back to him. Nostalgic pain cut through him, because those days were gone and would never return. He met Madge Dunham's steady gaze and something in her eyes—either great concern or supreme pity, he couldn't decide which—took possession of all his thoughts.

"Remember you, Madge?" he said. "Why, in the hospital I dreamed about you. You were an actress like Lillie Langtry, and I was a dashing young cattle baron, with a six-shooter on each hip. You offered me a dill pickle and I kissed your hand. At El Caney and the Ridge I remembered you, too."

"They told me you were dead!" she cried. Her lips trembled. She seemed like a little girl again.

He got out a clean handkerchief and held it to her nose. "Blow!"

"I'm so happy, Clark."

Later, she sat beside him and a sort of diffidence came over them both, so that they didn't talk much. There were many questions he wanted to ask. He guessed Luke Vastine had been to Nueces. He knew he should have written Fay so she would know that he had

pulled through. But until a month ago he had been too weak to hold a pen. Then he'd decided to just come on and surprise her. He wondered how she had taken Vastine's news. Just looking forward to the moment when he would see her again and take her in his arms made his heart pick up a faster beat. He told himself that he would never let her go.

The train went rocking southward, stopping at Lytle, Devine, Moore. The day's heat crept upward and the hot wind came in through the open coach windows and brought clouds of red dust. Because Ragan's eyes were trained to notice such things, the sere, sparse grass and the stretches where there was no grass, did not escape him. Along the right-of-way were cows so gaunt their ribs stood out like barrel staves. Some of them, driven by hunger and thirst to disregard the needle-sharp thorns, were feeding on the prickly-pear that thrived in this sun-scorched land.

Ragan shook his head. For to a native of a country where a man's brand was his coat-of-arms and the cattle he owned the backbone of his existence, such a sight was sad. Drought! He wondered how long it had held on, but he didn't ask until they stopped at Pearsall.

CHAPTER TWO

Home Is the Soldier

ACROSS YONDER he saw an unpainted pine building with a false front. A sign across it read: TEXAS PEAR BURNER CO.

"Is it that bad?" he asked Madge. "Do they have to organize a company of men to cut prickly-pear and use pitchforks to hold the leaves over a mesquite-wood fire and burn off the thorns?"

She shook her head. "It's not that, Clark. Some man here has invented a new-fangled device that uses gasoline to burn off the thorns. He claims wonderful things for it, but Branch Yarber and Simms Birk say it's no good. Along with a new ranchman, they've formed a sort of pool. Clayton Masters, the banker, is in with them, and they've bought up all the pitchforks and axes and wagons and hired all the available men to work for them. They're making out pretty good, burning prickly-pear the old way, by hand, for their cattle. It's the little fellows the drought is ruining. Dad wants to help them, but there's not much he can do. You don't know how bad it is, Clark!"

"I can imagine, Madge. How long has it been?"

"We haven't had a real rain since you've been gone. Unless something breaks soon," she said soberly, "this whole country will be ruined, except for that handful of men with Clayton Masters. The worst of it is, it's brought bitterness and suspicion, even violence. A month ago Andy Witton, on the San Roque, persuaded a couple of Mexicans to help him burn pear. Simms Birk, who's still foreman for old Branch Yarber, tried to hire the Mexicans away from Andy, even threatened them. Two days later Andy heard a shot. He rode out and found one of his men dead, with a bullet hole under his heart. The other had disappeared."

"The other one," Ragan said, "probably didn't stop this side of Old Mexico."

"I don't believe it, Clark. I don't believe any man could run that old Mexican very far." She gave him a queer, almost measuring look. "He was old Julio Gomez"—she pronounced it "Hoolio"—"who worked for you so long."

Ragan sat still, staring out the window while a little ridge of muscle built up along his lean jaw. When finally he spoke again it was in the softest of voices.

"No, Madge, old Julio never ran far. He might be lying in some brushy draw, dead. But old Julio never ran."

The train came to a grinding stop and Ragan, looking out the window, suddenly reached a decision. This was Del Valle, ten miles from Nueces. His Running R lay a couple hours' ride west of here, and by borrowing a horse at this whistle stop he could save enough time to reach the ranch before dark. He stood up and reached for his valise.

"I'm going to leave you here, Madge. I hope to see you in a few days."

"Don't fail to, Clark! There are so many things I should have told you, but—"

"I've got to run," Ragan said. "It's been good seeing you, Madge."

He went out the rear door as the train jerked into motion, carrying with him the memory of a pair of brown eyes. Her last words lingered in his ears. "Be careful, Clark!"

From fat Cy Dowdy, the storekeeper, he borrowed a sorry horse and a hundred-dollar saddle. He was headed west through the mesquite, the valise strapped behind him, when Madge Dunham's warning came back to him.

"Now, why," he wondered aloud, "did she go and say that?"

He rode with his eyes studying the dust-powdered mesquite, the dun earth and the burned, meager grass that clung stubbornly to it, and again he shook his head. This range was in worse shape than the country above Pearsall. But it was still home, and after two years he had a Texas horse between his knees and the air he breathed had a tang to it that reached through to his blood and sang like

wine in his veins. This was a land he had thought never to see again.

Fay would understand, he knew. Likely she hadn't used his land; old Branch Yarber must own a half million acres. Still, she would understand and appreciate his feeling, lying in that hospital, when he wanted her to have what little there was to remember him by. She would treasure the ring and the watch with her picture inside the case more than the land or the cattle.

Luke Vastine, he remembered, had once admired Fay's picture and told him what a lucky man he was. But then Luke had an eye for anything beautiful, especially a woman. There was that nasty affair with the young lieutenant's wife, at Tampa; then the dark-eyed Cuban girl. Luke's policy was to love 'em and leave 'em, he didn't care in what shape.

Ragan suddenly stood up in the stirrups. Above the low mesquite tops he saw a sight quite common to this land, a row of mesquite posts, carrying four strands of black barbed wire. But to Clark Ragan those posts with the wire stapled to them represented more than just a fence. He remembered the sweat, blisters and back aches he and old Julio had put into the building of that fence, and now it stepped along there a proud and finished thing, the boundary of his land. He owned all the land he could see beyond that boundary, the prickly-pear flats, the black-brush ridges, and merely seeing it was not enough. He settled back into saddle and drove spur to his borrowed horse, with eagerness lighting his face and making his heart beat faster.

THERE WAS no gap or gate along here, so he had to take down the wire and then put it up again. The old six-shooter, with its shell belt and holster, that had gone with him through the Cuban campaign, was in his valise, and he got the gun out and used the butt of it to drive the staples back in the posts. He had carried the gun so long that he felt uncomfortable without it; yet he didn't realize he had missed the weapon until he was securing it in place on his thigh. The thought came to him then that, in a way, a Colt six-shooter was a Texas cattleman's symbol. Land and cattle were his most valuable possessions, and by the grace of God and a Colt .45 he hung onto both of them!

Ragan got his first sight of the ranchhouse when he topped Packsaddle Hill. He and old Julio had hauled rock by mule team and wagon, and they had built the house Texas style, long and low with a wide front porch running the length of the building, the chimneys of the two fireplaces rising at each end. The house faced away from Ragan, toward the west, and through the blue dusk settling in the valley he did not at first notice the smoke curling from the stovepipe which thrust upward from the lean-to kitchen. When he did notice he touched spur to the borrowed horse and went on down the slope, conscious of a queer let-down feeling close to anger.

For some reason he hadn't expected to find the ranchhouse occupied. He went forward slowly, thinking about this. Two middling-good horses in a brand strange to him—a V Up and Down—stood switching their tails at the flies in the pack-pole corral he and old Julio had built. He rode on past them, his wonderment sharpening, until he reached the front corner of the ranchhouse and reined up.

A man and a woman stood in the yard, facing the house, their shoulders almost touching. They were too interested in their own business to notice Ragan, and as he watched he saw the man's right arm make a sweeping gesture, saw the woman nod.

"We'll pull down that south chimney," the man was saying. "We'll build on an L, giving us three more rooms. I'll buy furniture in San Antonio or New Orleans. You'll have a piano, Fay. When you're my wife, nothing will ever cramp you. You'll have everything you want, if money can buy it. If it can't, I'll steal it. That's how much I think of you, darling!"

It was, Ragan thought, the same old stuff; the same throb in his voice, almost the same words. He remembered the night he had come on Luke Vastine talking to the Cuban girl. But here a couple things were different. This was his property Luke was being so reckless with. This was his girl Luke was making his fine promises to.

Ragan rode on around the corner, thinking he had himself well under control. He saw Fay's white face tilt upward as she broke away from Vastine. He heard her little gasp of recognition. He didn't stop. He rode on past them and swung down at the edge of the porch, all very deliberately, and he was tying the reins to a porch post when his hands began to shake. Because he didn't like their shaking, he took his time with the reins. He kept telling himself it was all a mistake. He couldn't blame Fay. He couldn't blame Luke. They had thought, like Madge Dunham, that he was dead.

Strangely enough, remembering Madge Dunham seemed to steady him. He turned to see Fay Yarber moving forward.

CHAPTER THREE

Fighting Man's Reward

SHE WAS fair-skinned, with pale gold hair that had a shine to it even in the dusk. Her eyes were the bluest Ragan had ever seen,

going darker when some emotion stirred her, always, as now, giving away her secrets. Or maybe he just imagined her eyes were dark. Maybe it was her mouth that betrayed her, with the full lips that desire or fear or anger always seemed to tighten. She came toward Ragan with both hands outstretched. She was all he had yearned for through so many long and lonesome months, and seeing her that way he almost forgot the past few moments. He told himself it must surely be desire he saw on her lips and in her eyes, and because he had dreamed so long of this moment, his arms reached out for her.

She stopped then, close enough to tantalize him, close enough that a single step would have taken him to her. But Ragan, while his eyes searched her face, held still.

"Tell me, Fay," he asked quietly, "has everything changed? I'm alive, you know. Aren't you glad to see me?"

He was aware that Luke Vastine had moved forward to stand at her shoulder. He never took his eyes off her face. She gave her head a little toss that flung the curled ends of golden hair off her shoulders. A laugh of pure excitement came from her throat, and remembering that laugh and the trick of tossing her head, Ragan knew how it was going to be like that night when she had played Simms Birk against him—only this time it was Luke Vastine instead of Simms. Only this time Ragan didn't intend to be played.

"I guess I've got your answer, Fay," he said. "You don't need to put it in words. Your buggy's tied to the porch. Get in it and take Luke with you. There's a little business we've got to settle, but that had better wait until some other time."

"Clark!" she cried. "Do you have to be so boorish? Of course I'm glad to see you. But it was a surprise!"

"I can imagine," he said wryly. "A sad surprise to both of you. Well, you can still let the wedding bells ring, but you'll have to forget about all those changes to my house."

"*Your* house?" Luke Vastine said. "Old man, aren't you forgetting something? Did the fever leave you a bit muddled? Surely you remember that terrific poker game. It was just before San Juan, before that bullet nipped you and old Luke had to play hero. You wrote out a bill of sale, saying, 'For one dollar and other considerations, I hereby assign to Lieutenant Luke Vastine one ranch owned by me in the Nueces Valley of Texas, all houses and other improvements on that ranch, all cattle in the Running R brand, et cetera, et cetera . . . .' The 'other considerations,' old fellow, was that last hand—aces up, over your queens. Too bad, but that's the way gambler's luck goes. I have your bill-of-sale, duly signed and witnessed, and any lawyer will tell you it will stand up in court.' There's the story!"

"My bill-of-sale," Ragan said hoarsely. "I asked you to write out my will! I asked you to deliver it to Fay, along with my watch and ring, after my death."

"I delivered them. The doctors told me you were the same as dead when I left you. But that business about the will. . ." He shook his head sadly. "I hope the will's only your imagination. I'd hate to think you're the sort of fellow who'd try to welsh on a bet. It would almost make me regret pulling you out from under those Spicks' guns."

Ragan saw the whole thing. It was the most brazen steal he'd ever seen pulled. Taking the chance that the two medical men who had signed as witnesses wouldn't bother to read the paper, Vastine had written out a bill-of-sale instead of a will, and like a fool he had signed the thing! He had come home all fired with hopes and ambition, thinking he was the luckiest man alive. Thinking he had a ranch and some cattle and a sweet, fine girl waiting for him, when all he had was the bitter taste this business had left in his mouth.

Luke Vastine was watching Ragan, his handsome, dark face wearing a faint smile. All Ragan had to do was take a single step, and he took it and the savage anger that was in him drove his fist forward. Even so, the blow only staggered Luke Vastine. It rocked him back a couple of steps, and when he caught his balance his hand was on his gun-butt. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and his dark eyes seemed to blaze at Ragan through the dusk.

"I won't kill you, Ragan. I guess the shock of losing Fay, the land and the cattle, has sort of addled you. Because I campaigned with you and know what you went through, I feel sorry for you. But you're washed up here. You're through. You might as well ride on."

"I will," Ragan said. "I'll ride to Nueces. But I'll be back."

Fay got out a handkerchief and was wiping the blood from Vastine's mouth. Ragan watched her for a moment, then said, "I'm coming back, Vastine, for my land and my cattle. Anything else, anything your soft talk can fool, you're welcome to."

He heard Fay draw in a sharp breath and he stepped past her to his borrowed horse, swung into saddle and rode away, not looking back.

IT WAS fifteen miles to Nueces town and Ragan rode a couple of miles in that direction, then remembered the old mustanger's shack on Blanco Creek and reined right and guided his horse through the mesquite. He could spend the night at the shack. The way he felt now he didn't want to talk to anyone. He rode with a black bitterness roweling him.

Sharp in his mind lay the thought of Luke Vastine.

He had no doubt that the bill-of-sale for his ranch and cattle would stand up in court; but one thing Vastine had overlooked. Even yet, the supreme law of this land was a Colt .45; a man with a slug through him couldn't argue. But first, Ragan told himself, he had to find old Julio Gomez or the men responsible for whatever injury had befallen him. After that, God alone knew.

Deep in his thoughts, Ragan never noticed when his horse reached the Blanco and went splashing across. The moon lifted above the mesquite tops and coyotes began quarreling at it, while just ahead a horse made a tentative nickering sound. Ragan pulled up then, abruptly alert. Ahead, above the moon-silvered chaparral, he could see the sod-and-brush top of the mustanger's shack, and from that direction came a sound that puzzled him.

Though not quite so sharp, it was a sound something like an axe might make, swung at measured intervals against a green mesquite log. Ragan couldn't figure it out, so he got down and tied his horse and went on afoot. He stopped at the edge of the clearing, which now was grown over with brush and weeds, and what he saw sent anger rushing through him.

A dilapidated wagon stood before the shack, with three men grouped near the back of it. They were facing away from Ragan, yet he instantly recognized the middle man of the trio, incredibly tall and lean, who was so diligently laboring. His two hands grasped the wooden stock of a whip and each time he swung the whip he grunted, turning sideways to get more weight behind the blow. The turn of his body showed Ragan his face in profile, the black gloss of a mustache prong, the sharp and predatory nose. Simms Birk, he thought, as his long legs carried him forward, was enjoying this thing; Birk had the instincts of a hawk, as well as the appearance.

The man spread-eagled to the near back wagon wheel made no sound at all. Ragan couldn't see the man's face. His identity made no difference to Ragan, anyway. He could see the bloody washboard of flesh that minutes ago had been the smooth, firm flesh of the man's back, and that, Ragan thought savagely, was quite enough. His boots made little sound against the matting of dead leaves, and when he pulled up he was less than three yards from Simms Birk. Birk picked that moment to rest himself a bit.

"Damn muleheaded Mex'can," he panted. "I ain't gunna kill you. I'm gunna leave you for a livin' example of what happens when any of you brown-bellied sons get smart-aleck. Think you can work where you please! Why don't you say something'? By God, I'll make you whine! I'll give it to you good!"

Birk lifted the whip, started his body-turn. Ragan, in a voice that shook a little, said, "I wouldn't hit him again, Birk. I wouldn't lay a finger on him."

The two men flanking Simms Birk swung hurriedly, reaching for their guns. But Birk was an old hand at business such as this, and there was a quality in Ragan's voice that turned him cautious and brought him slowly around. His sharp, deep-socketed eyes surveyed Ragan with insolence. He seemed not to notice the gun ready in Ragan's hand.

"So it's you," he said, "our own hero, come home from the wars. What do you want, Ragan?"

Ragan placed the other two, now. Scotty Wanger, with the smooth pink cheeks and the ready smile; he'd been smiling, they said, when he killed that Mexican down at Rio Grande City. The skinny one with a face like the blade of a hatchet was named Muldrew. Both Spanish Bit riders. But Simms Birk was the man to watch.

Ragan said coldly, "I want you, Birk, and this pair with you. I'm takin' you in to the sheriff, and I don't care what shape I get you there in. For my money, you're a damned cowardly mongrel. Let that whip drop and unbuckle your gunbelt. Real easy, Birk."

"You go to hell," Birk said, not moving. "You haven't got the guts to shoot."

Ragan shoved his right hand forward, driving the Colt's long barrel into Birk's lean belly. When Birk made a gagging sound and suddenly broke as if his whiplike body were hinged in the middle, Ragan swung the Colt upward and laid its barrel across Birk's ear. The blow dropped Birk to all fours and he stayed there, shaking his head. Immediately Ragan stepped back.

"Uh-unh, Scotty," he murmured. "Be smart, Scotty, and shuck that gun."

From the ground, Simms Birk said, viciously, "You wasn't so smart, Ragan. A smart man would have killed me. You righteous damned—"

The name he called Ragan came with explosive violence, and Simms Birk was off the ground as if propelled by a giant spring. He scooped up a double handful of sand and soil and crumbling leaves and flung the mixture square into Ragan's face. Ragan leaped to one side. Hot needles were pricking his eyelids and he couldn't hold them open; but the blast of Birk's six-shooter numbed his ears, the flame seared his cheek. He didn't need eyes to know how close death passed him by.

Then, from not far distant, a voice called thinly, "Leave him alone! Leave him alone!" A rifle, higher pitched than the six-shooters, whanged wickedly. A man cried out in pain, and the rifle whanged a second time. Ragan

heard the slogging of boots going away fast. He forced his eyes open a crack and saw Madge Dunham, in a floppy hat and man's clothes, step from the darkness of the mesquite, holding a carbine to her shoulder.

"This way, Ragan!"

The voice was Simms Birk's. Ragan, as he turned, glimpsed the man crouched in the edge of the brush. He seemed to be pointing his finger at Ragan. He seemed to be holding an orange-red blossom which flared brilliantly, then winked out. . . .

AT FIRST the voices came as a mumble. Ragan couldn't make them out. He opened his eyes and pain crashed through his head, and then, dimly, he heard someone say, *"Hijo!* I thought you were dead, my son."

Ragan tried to sit up. An arm went around his shoulders and helped him. He couldn't understand it, for the beaming, wrinkled brown face was still there, the face of old Julio, and he was saying in a mixture of languages, "Clark! *Madre de Dios,* it is good to see you!" Tears ran from the old man's squinted brown eyes, and he reached and caught Ragan in a bear hug that made his ribs pop.

Another voice said, "Clark, we've been worried about you!"

Ragan turned his head and saw Madge Dunham. He reached up and felt a furrow along his scalp that he could lay two fingers in. He said, "I feel fine, Madge! I never felt better in my life. How come you here, Madge?"

"I heard them talking, in the store. Simms Birk and that man Scotty. Scotty told Birk he had seen smoke at this old shack and he'd bet that was where Julio was. I knew they—I rode to your place. That man, Vastine, told me you had just left. I hadn't met you on the road, and I thought maybe you had come here to spend the night. Clark, I wounded one of them! I had dad's old saddle gun, and I thought they were going to kill you! Clark, after all you've been through—to come home and—" Suddenly she was crying, and Ragan reached and caught her shoulders.

"Madge," he said gently, "you and old Julio. I never had anyone else fight for me. Why, Madge?"

Her head lifted and she stared at him for a long time. Then she shook her head wistfully. "No, you wouldn't know. To you I'm just the little girl in pigtails who used to follow you around the store and eat candy and dill pickles, and think you were some kind of knight in shining armor. Well, I guess you still are, Clark. But you wouldn't understand."

"I understand you're loyal to your friends," he said. "You have courage. You . . ." For the first time he noticed the gray light coming through the doorway and windows. "Madge! You've been here all night. Your father!"

"Do you think," she asked, "that I could leave, with you out of your head? Doctor Dunk is in Encinal, or I would have ridden for him. Dad is in San Antonio, talking with his wholesalers. Clark, what are you going to do? You've lost your ranch. It looks like this whole country's ruined. There's a cattlemen's meeting in town today. Clayton Masters, Branch Yarber and some of the bigwigs, I understand, are going to offer two dollars a head for cattle that should bring twenty. The little fellows, like Andy Witton, can't hire hands to burn pear. They'll have to take Masters' offer. It looks like Clayton Masters is going to own the brush country."

Ragan held silent, thinking of Andy Witton. A small, leathery, hard-working man, he owned five thousand acres that bordered on the Nueces. Land his granddaddy had earned, fighting with Sam Houston, at San Jacinto. Ragan thought of old Julio, who in his younger years had helped Ragan's daddy build up the Running R, who as the years salted his hair had helped Clark Ragan, as he had helped Lon Ragan. Julio Gomez was truly a Texan. His ancestors had settled this land before even Stephen Austin or Sam Houston set foot upon it. Now ruthless and greedy men, like Clayton Masters, thought to control the brush country by intimidation and brutality. Ragan shook his head sadly. Then muscles knotted along his lean jaw.

"Julio, old amigo," he asked softly, "do we run or do we fight?"

The flesh had been stripped from the old Mexican's back. The fever from his hurts brightened his eyes. He looked at Clark Ragan and grinned like a brown wolf.

"You have come home, my son," he said simply. "In my heart I knew you would come. This paisano is too old to run."

"Let's get the horses then," Ragan said, and in his voice was quiet satisfaction. "We're going to that cattlemen's meeting."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bait for the Shoe-Stringers

SADDLED horses, buggies and buckboards lined the white picket fence; this fence was something new to Ragan, but otherwise the scene was as he remembered it. The boxed cistern at the side of the low white building. The ancient live oak that spread its arms over the cistern and half the building as well. The bronze bell perched above the front door, on the rooftree, with its pull-rope swinging idly in the breeze.

Ragan, as he and old Julio moved toward the door, could see in his mind a chunky lad with eyes of an incredible blue, a shock of sandy hair and a buck-toothed smile, pulling on the

bell rope with much vigor; for Andy Witton always was the teacher's favorite. Ragan went through the door, Julio trailing him, and he knew a moment's nostalgic yearning for those carefree days of tops and aggies and wolf across the river—days which were gone and would never come again. He halfway expected to see Miss Mamie, sharp-eyed and withered, behind the battered oak desk. Sight of the person ensconced there drove all these soft memories from his mind and left his senses sharp and alert.

In his late thirties, Clayton Masters stared across the desk top at this roomful of men. Smoke from the cigar that lay between his square fingers curled upward, drifted past the edge of the desk and went on out the side window; and through this faint haze the banker stared at Ragan briefly, his dark eyes arrogant. His fisted right hand thumped the oak wood for emphasis, and he kept on talking.

"So that's the way it is, gentlemen. The bank is prepared to pay two dollars a round for your drought cattle, one dollar an acre for your land. I sincerely wish we could pay more, but we might go broke, at that. No man knows how long this drought will hold on. There's not a cow in the country fat enough to sell. The bank might wind up like the old days, following the war—have to sell cattle for four-bit a head for the hide and tallow. Except there wouldn't be any tallow. Well, gentlemen, speak up. Do I hear any takers?"

To Ragan's right, a stocky little man rose to his feet. He held his hat in front of him, his hands twisting and turning the limp sweat-stained brim. Except for a fringe of sandy hair, his head was bald; and there was upon him, in the deep lines at mouth and eye corners, in the weary diffidence of his voice, the unmistakable marks of drudgery and hopeless struggle. Andy Witton, clearly, had not lived off the the fat of the land.

And as the little man began to talk, Ragan noted another thing. The aisle that bisected the room was a line that separated Andy Witton and the small ranchers from old Branch Yarber and other big cattlemen and their cohorts. Ragan, still standing in the doorway, could see the back of Yarber's grizzled gray head and his sharp-boned shoulders, wedged in between the lean-sloped shoulders of Simms Birk and the beautiful and symmetric ones of Luke Vastine. Luke Vastine, Ragan thought blackly, of the V Up and Down.

"And that all sounds good enough, Masters," Andy Witton was saying, with a rising bitterness sharpening his voice. "But if I sell to you for a dollar an acre, for two dollars a round, I'll come out with just about enough to pay off the note your bank holds. All I'll have left is a worn-out saddle, the clothes on my back, and four kids to feed. These fellers here will all be in about the same shape. I've sweated blood to make that ranch pay and, by God, I'll die before I let you steal it from me!"

"Yeah, and another thing!" Reed Bowman, surging to his feet beside Andy Witton, almost yelled. "We might beat the drought if we could hire any hands to burn pear. You don't want us to beat it, Masters! You and Yarber, there, have hired all the Mex'cans. Them you couldn't hire, you've bullied and shot and scared off. Just like you did those two men Andy hired. You murdered one of 'em, and the other hasn't been seen since. Well, I'll tell you one thing. If Andy and the rest will stick by me, I won't take this thing sittin' down!"

Reed Bowman was a ruddy, full-blooded man. He dropped a freckle-backed hand to the butt of the .45 that bulged at his thigh; and little Andy Witton said sharply, "I'm with you, Reed! I'm with you till the cows come home!"

ELSEWHERE men were rising; and in a space of time no longer than it takes to cock a six-shooter, this meeting of cattlemen had turned vibrant and dangerous. Andy Witton, Reed Bowman and the other small ranchers, ordinarily peaceful and hard-working men, looked down all the hard, lean years and saw the things they held most dear being taken away from them. A sort of insanity came over them and brought a low and ugly growling from their throats. Above this sound the voice of Clayton Masters spoke with authority.

"Baugh!"

Clark Ragan held still, watching Red Baugh move toward the small ranchmen. Red Baugh had been a ranch foreman for Clayton Masters, then deputy sheriff, and now he wore the sheriff's star on his unbuttoned black vest. A big, heavy-boned man, he had one of those thin-skinned faces always turned beef-raw by wind and sun. He stopped before Andy Witton, and there was suppressed violence in him that made his pale milky-blue eyes still and watchful. He spoke almost gently.

"You'd better sit down, Witton. You'd better not start trouble."

Andy Witton looked upward at the big man. A wildness came in his eyes and he cried in a voice high and thin, "You go to hell, Baugh! Everybody knows whose horse you ride! You're one of Masters' damned—!"

The heel of Baugh's open left hand struck Andy Witton's jaw with a sharp and definite sound. The blow knocked the little man sideways; and Reed Bowman said, "Damn you, Baugh!" He dragged his gun halfway from leather, then stopped.

Red Baugh stood there, with his own gun cleared, and taunted the group of small ranchers.

"Go ahead, Bowman, any of you. I'll teach

you, by God, to start trouble around here!"

"Trouble," Reed Bowman said bitterly. For a long moment he stared at Baugh, and he saw Simms Birk and Luke Vastine moving forward behind the sheriff. Slowly the fire went from his eyes, his shoulders lost their stiffness, and he was a man beaten and without hope.

Andy Witton, in a wooden and colorless way, said, "It's no use, Reed. They've got the money and the law, both. I guess Masters' offer is better than nothing. I guess we'll have to take it."

"That sounds better!" said Clayton Masters, the only man in the room not standing. Hollows appeared in his firm-fleshed cheeks as he drew on his cigar. Then he flipped the cigar toward the near window. "Step up, Witton, you can be first. I've brought all the necessary blank forms. Baugh, get the rest of them lined up."

Little Andy Witton half turned. He raked the knot of beaten cattlemen with one last, desperate glance, and the words that came from his lips were like a groan.

"God, I never thought I'd see the day."

At a dragging step Andy Witton moved toward the banker, and there was something about the little man that turned the room quite still. Into this silence the voice of Clark Ragan cut sharply.

"Stop where you are, Andy! They haven't tagged you out yet."

Why Ragan chose those exact words he didn't know himself; but in the old days when Reed Bowman always was thinking up mischief, Red Roy Baugh was the schoolyard bully and Andy Witton trailed Ragan like a shadow, Ragan had been the recognized leader of his class. Now his words brought back those memories, and with them the hope, clearly expressed on the fact of Andy Witton, that here once more, in Clark Ragan, was a man he could follow and have confidence in.

"Clark!" little Andy Witton said, and he came toward Ragan with his hand outstretched.

Reed Bowman and the rest of the little fellows crowded around Ragan; and then, past Bowman's shoulder, he saw Red Baugh scowling at him, and beside Baugh the faces of Luke Vastine and Simms Birk were cold and unfriendly, and Clayton Masters was saying, "Ragan, we're glad to have you home. But after all, this is a cattlemen's meeting, and I understand you are no longer in the cattle business. So . . ." He sat there not moving, staring at Ragan, a man who was a power in this country and entirely sure of himself.

Ragan felt his body go warm. It took a tremendous effort to hold his voice even. He said, "Masters, whether I'm in the cattle business or not is a matter of opinion. One thing is certain. Someone around here has to call your hand, and I reckon I'm the man to do it. You and Branch Yarber seem to be in this deal together. I've come here today to show you both something. Julio! *Aqui, amigo.*"

The old Mexican came slowly along the aisle, while men made way for him. Following Ragan's instructions, he stepped up onto the slightly raised platform. He took off his shirt and when he turned, every man in the room could see the livid welts and the blood-crusted lacerations made by the hard, braided rawhide of the whip Simms Birk had used.

"They tied him to a wagon wheel," Ragan said grimly. "If I hadn't shown up, I guess they would have killed him."

His last words were drowned out by a rising and ugly growl of sound.

He handed the blood-stained shirt to old Julio. "Go see if Doctor Dunk's back yet. Have him fix up that back." And, as Julio hesitated: "Go ahead. I'll be along directly."

"Who did it, Ragan?"

The fire was back in little Andy Witton's eyes, and beside him Reed Bowman spoke savagely.

"Yes, by God! Who were the sorry sons?"

"I haven't proof," Ragan said, "but I'd bet my bottom dollar, Andy, that they're the same men who killed your Mexican hand. Julio heard the shot and hid. When he went to look, the Mexican was dead and his murderers gone. They learned Julio was staying in that old mustanger's shack, and last night they went there for him. Who's orders they acted under, I couldn't say. But Clayton Masters is the one tryin' to buy you boys out for a song. Branch Yarber is the one who carries those three doodlebugs on his payroll. Their names are Wanger, Muldrew and Simms Birk."

"Ragan," a voice said hoarsely, "I'll kill you for this, Ragan!"

SIMMS BIRK, his sharp beak of a nose and his cold, glittering eyes making him look cruel as a hawk, was shoving forward on his long, skinny legs. Red Baugh fell in beside Birk; and Ragan stepped down from the foot-high platform, and was glad that the aisle behind the approaching pair was empty. The old reckless feeling that the months in the hospital had dimmed, now flared up inside Ragan, brightly, and the feeling was a welcome one. For he knew that he still was a man.

Ragan asked softly, "What do you aim to do about it, Birk? Like I told you last night, for my money you're a damned cowardly mongrel. I claim that the three of you jumped old Julio, near killed him. Do you intend to deny it?"

"You're lyin'," Birk said through his teeth. "I didn't see you last night, didn't even know you were back in this country."

Ragan's gaze lifted to the black sombrero,

carefully slanted across Birk's head. He murmured, "Your memory's bad, Birk. Or maybe I didn't slap you hard enough with that gun barrel." So casually that Birk was caught by surprise, he reached up and with a flick of his hand sent the black sombrero turning lazily to the floor. Birk ripped out an oath, by instinct moving a hand to the long welt above his left ear.

"There!" Ragan said. "Remember, don't you?"

"All right, Ragan—" Birk started harshly. Then his voice went soft, and he said, "There can't be but one way to this now. Ragan, whenever you're—"

It was then, surprisingly, that little Andy Witton made his play. All these men were watching Ragan and Simms Birk, and Andy Witton simply pulled his gun clear and shoved the muzzle hard against Birk's ribs.

"Pull his fangs, Ragan!" the little man sang out, his voice high with excitement. "With you home, maybe we'll have a new deal around here."

Ragan was watching Red Baugh, waiting to see what move Baugh would make. When Baugh's right hand touched gun-butt, Ragan said quietly, "Think it over, Baugh." The man's red face went to a violent shade, but he hesitated, and Ragan said, "You're the sheriff, and we'll go according to the law, if you want it that way. I'm going to prefer charges against Muldrew, Scotty Wanger and Simms Birk. It will be your duty to arrest them."

Old Branch Yarber came shoving forward, his leathery face screwed up in a scowl. "I'll go bail," he declared. "You prove some of them statements, Ragan, and maybe I'll fire the three of 'em. But no man of mine is going to lay in jail, unless I know he's guilty. And a man like you, that'd gamble away his ranch and cattle in a poker game—I wouldn't believe him on oath!"

Red Baugh still was undecided. "Ragan, I've got a good mind to run you in," he growled. "Comin' here and startin'—"

"Let it go, Baugh!" Masters said. "Everybody's upset now. I'll call another meeting after they have time to think the thing over. I tried to do them a favor, but if they want to listen to a hothead like Ragan, well, the next meeting will be the last one. Let's adjourn."

Masters paused to light a fresh cigar. Then he walked past Ragan, not looking at him, and Branch Yarber, Simms Birk and their crowd followed the banker. But at the door Birk paused.

"Ragan," he said softly, "be ready."

"We better all be ready," said little Andy Witton. "But how? Ragan, what are we going to do?"

"In Pearsall," Ragan said, there's a man invented a pear burner. . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'll Remember, Ragan"

ANDY WITTON, Reed Bowman and especially old Julio, argued with Ragan; but he refused to listen. Witton and Bowman had work to do. Julio was running a fever. Ragan would make the trip alone. He borrowed a wagon and team from Walt Dunham, the storekeeper, and while the mules were being hitched up he walked next door to the restaurant. He ordered black coffee and was drinking it when an item on the front page of a San Antonio newspaper, on the counter, caught his eye. It said:

> This city is honored to have as a visitor, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, of Rough Rider fame. Beloved Colonel "Teddy" will be "at home" to his friends at the Menger Hotel. A prominent candidate for the next Vice-Presidency of the United States, Colonel Teddy will make a speech. . . .

Ragan laid down the newspaper, slid a coin across the counter, and going toward the door was so engrossed in thought that he almost bumped into Red Baugh. Not nodding, Ragan started on past. Baugh touched his arm.

"The boss—Masters wants to see you. Could you step down to the bank?"

Ragan's smile was thin. "So it's 'the boss,' huh?" He watched Baugh's red face go a rich wine color, then he said, "Tell yo' boss, if he wants to see me, he'll have to do the leg work. And he'd better hurry, because I'm leavin' town."

"Say! You can't—" Red Baugh started. But Ragan had stepped past him.

"You just think I can't," he murmured as he went out the door.

It took him five minutes to go over to the depot and write the brief message he wanted the operator to send. When he got back to the Mercantile, Walt Dunham was waiting with the wagon.

"You ought to make it by one," he said. "Good luck, Ragan!"

He turned and went inside the store. Ragan lifted the reins, and behind him a voice called, "A moment, fellow!" Before Ragan swung around the rich aroma of Clayton Masters' cigar reached his nostrils. Deliberately Ragan said, "Well, fellow?"

Masters held the cigar so that the moist end almost touched his lips. With his little finger he flicked off the ash and his eyes stared at Ragan, past the glowing tip, they too seeming to glow.

"I'll be brief, Ragan, and blunt. You might cause me some trouble. I can stop you, and will, if it comes to violence, but I'd prefer to deal with you another way. You've lost your

land, your cattle. Apparently you've lost Fay Yarber, too. There is nothing to hold you in this country except stubbornness. And that is a thing apt to bring you grief. I'll give you a thousand dollars, cash, to clear out and stay out. I want your answer now."

"So you figure you can buy me off, for a thousand dollars," Ragan said quietly. "You think money can buy anything, don't you? Well, supposing it could, how would that help you, Masters? After all, I'm just one man."

"You're the leader. You're the king-pin, Ragan. The others I can handle easily." From his inside coat pocket Masters took a thin sheaf of bills. "Here's the money, Ragan. Take it and clear out."

Ragan took the bills. He riffled the edges and saw that they were all hundreds. He said softly, "You want an answer, Masters? Right this moment?"

"Now," Masters said.

"Then, by God, you can have it! You greedy damned range hog, you couldn't buy me with all the money in your rotten bank! You couldn't buy my finger! I fought against men a lot more decent than you, and the day you die this whole country ought to celebrate! Here's your money—take it!" And he flung the bills square into Clayton Masters' face. A little breeze picked them up and swirled them down the street like dry leaves, and Clayton Masters stood there, not moving, staring at Ragan.

Ragan left him that way, hearing not a word from the man until the mules settled into their collars and the wagon started rolling. Clayton Masters said then, "I'll remember, Ragan."

It wasn't a threat. It was a statement of a fact. Ragan never looked back.

MR. WOODHULL was a graying, kindly, courteous gentleman. He explained that a pear burner was a kind of flame-thrower, burning gasoline and operating under a hundred pounds of air pressure. One man using a pear burner, he said, could burn as much pear as ten men, chopping off the leaves with axes and holding them over a mesquite-wood fire to burn off the thorns. Mr. Woodhull pumped air into one of his pear burners and demonstrated its use.

The price, he said, was $27.50 per burner. How many of them, now, would Mr. Ragan be needing?

Ragan had three hundred dollars in his wallet, all the cash that Andy Witton, Reed Bowman and the others could raise. He said, "I need thirty burners, Mr. Woodhull." He pulled out his wallet, counted to two hundred and fifty, then stopped. "We've got to have the rest for gasoline. And we've got to have those burners!"

"Who," asked Mr. Woodhull, "is 'we'?"

Ragan explained, grimly, in detail. He told about the whipping of old Julio, the murder of the Mexican on Andy Witton's place. "Clayton Masters is using the drought like he uses his bank mortgages—so he can grab all the country. He won't lend the little men a dime. Mr. Woodhull, unless you help us, every small rancher along the Nueces is going under," Ragan finished his plea.

By that time the old gentleman was looking as grim as Ragan did. But he shook his head, slowly, sadly.

"I'm sorry, son. I had a little spread, and it was a drought put me out of the cattle business. You know I'd like to help. I just can't do it. I'm operating on a shoestring—have to pay cash for the brass and stuff I use, and make sizable monthly payments on my lathes and drill press and other equipment. I might stretch a point and let you have ten burners for that two hundred and fifty."

"I was stretchin' it considerable thin," Ragan said, "when I just asked for thirty. Man, we could use a hundred burners!"

"I'm sorry, son."

Minutes later, when Ragan started for the door, the weight of a black bitterness pressed down on his shoulders. He thought of Andy Witton and of all the other little fellows who would be disappointed in him. He thought of all the starving cattle that would die. Luke Vastine and the ranch he had stolen, all of Ragan's own troubles were far back and dim in his mind. Inside his skull, fever bright, revolved two images: One lean and dark and predatory, a hawk with no mercy in him; the other well-fed and ruthless and greedy, a hog without conscience. Simms Birk and Clayton Masters.

"Damn their souls," Ragan said aloud, savagely. "I ought to kill both of them."

He turned out the door. Madge Dunham, coming on at swift stride, pulled up and was close enough that when she lifted her hand her fingertips brushed his shoulder.

"They told me, Andy Witton and them," she said all in a rush. "I came on the morning train. Clark, I've brought six hundred dollars."

"But your father! I asked him—"

"He hasn't any cash, Clark. This drought has hit him hard. He's been carrying Andy Witton, Reed Bowman and a lot of others for groceries. This money is mine, Clark. Money my mother left me. You've got to take it!"

Ragan didn't say anything. He couldn't. He swallowed and the bunching muscles hurt his throat. Then he took a single stride, his arms gathered her in, and he held her so tightly that he could feel the rising beat of her heart. . . .

Ragan headed back to Nueces in the wagon

Walt Dunham had lent him, only on the return trip the wagon wasn't empty and Ragan wasn't alone. On the wagon seat beside him sat Madge Dunham. Behind them in the wagon box rode three fifty-gallon drums of gasoline and thirty spanking new pear burners!

The bright brass of those burners caught fire from the sun; and when Ragan, every now and then, turned to look at them, the sight made his whole face light up.

"Madge," he said once, solemnly, "they're beautiful! This is my land, Madge, and I guess I'm rooted in it pretty deep. Many a night I lay in wet blankets, with mosquitoes singin' in my ears, and just thought about getting back to the brush country. I thought about my ranch, and of ridin' the mesquite and workin' my cattle and going to town Saturdays, maybe having a few beers with my friends. It seems like, Madge, all my friends are hard up against it. I hope to God these pear burners will pull them through!"

"And what about you, Clark?" she asked. "What about your ranch? Feeling the way you feel, Clark, nobody in the world could make me believe you risked your land and cattle playing cards."

"No," he admitted. "But that's a personal matter, between Luke Vastine and me. He saved my life once, Madge."

They rode a while in silence, going down a lane bordered by barbed wire. Across the fence Ragan saw three gaunt drouth-weakened cows around a prickly-pear clump, driven by hunger to eat the needle-thorned pear. He pulled up the mules and said, "Watch!"

The pear burner that Woodhull had used for his demonstration lay in the back of the wagon, with the gasoline in its tank still under air pressure. Ragan carried it across the fence, struck a match, held the flame to the burner tip and opened the feed valve. There was a popping sound, and a tongue of blue flame came from the burner. Ragan looked across the fence at Madge, his face bright as a small boy's.

The cows wearily moved away a few steps, as Ragan circled the clump of pear, playing the burner flame against the spiny thorns. Minutes later, when Ragan climbed back to the wagon seat, the starving brutes again had their heads bent over the clump of pear and were munching greedily.

"Mouths look like pincushions," Ragan said, slapping the mules into motion. "Poor brutes get hungry enough, they'll eat pear unburned, but lots of times it kills them. Madge, pear burners are going to be a big thing for this country."

"Not," declared Madge, smiling briefly, "according to Branch Yarber. He says they're apt to explode. He says the devil might have use for such a contraption in his domain, but personally he wouldn't touch one any sooner than he'd grab a bobcat by the tail!"

Ragan made no comment.

They rolled on in silence save for the slogging of the mules' hoofs and the gentle chuckling of the wagon wheels.

THEY reached Del Valle shortly after sundown. On the up-trip Ragan had returned the horse and saddle he had borrowed from Cy Dowdy, so he was surprised when the storekeeper hailed him.

"Ho-up," Ragan ordered the mules, and watched Dowdy hurry down the steps toward him. Through the dusk Ragan could see the figure of a man, just inside the doorway of the darkening store. Some loafer or late customer, he guessed. But something about that vague, quiet shape brought him sharply alert.

"Evenin', Miss Madge; Ragan." Cy Dowdy nodded. He handed Ragan a folded bit of paper, murmured, "It was left for you," and went hurrying back to his store.

"Didn't even notice the pear burners," Ragan said thoughtfully. "Funny, isn't it?"

The note was initialed *"F."* His eyes narrowed against the fading light, Ragan read: "Some men are waiting at Crow. Take the River Road." Ragan didn't need the initial to tell him who had written the note. Fay Yarber.

He crumpled the bit of paper, flipped it away and set the mules in motion. He was thankful that Madge asked no questions, because he wanted to think. Before they reached the forks he had to make a decision. Why, he wondered, had Fay taken the trouble to warn him?

They reached the forks an hour after dark. The main road ran straight ahead, across Crow Creek, to Nueces. The River Road branched off to the right, led to the Nueces and followed it on to town. Ragan pulled the team onto this road, and wondered if he were being a fool. He no longer meant anything to Fay Yarber, so it seemed queer that she would interest herself in his troubles.

The moon was up by the time they reached the Nueces, but here beneath the live oaks the road twisted through gloomy shadows. Ragan said, "You still haven't asked any questions, Madge. Is that like a woman?" He didn't look at her. His eyes searched ahead and to each side, probing the denser stands of underbrush, alert for anything that moved or captured moonlight.

"Am I a woman, to your eyes, Clark?" she asked. "Sometimes I wonder. I'm almost twenty, practically a spinster. Tell me sometime what you really think of me. I'd like to know."

"I can tell you that now," Ragan said, suddenly aware of the isolation of this road, aware

of her nearness. "You're a woman, Madge. To me, you're a mighty wonderful woman."

The plodding, weary mules, as if sensing Ragan's relaxed vigilance, slowed their pace, the road angled left from the river, and the live oaks fell away. Ragan, in the brightening moonlight, watched the girl's face and was surprised at its wistfulness.

"If I could only know you meant that, Clark," she murmured. "Know that it wasn't just—*Clark!*"

Two men rode from the brush on her side of the wagon. Bandannas covered their faces. Gun steel glinted in their hands. Madge was staring past Ragan's shoulder and her frozen expression told him what to expect, even before he turned to look. As he turned, his hand started upward with his six-shooter, then stopped. He couldn't take that chance with Madge here.

Something came through the air with a soft hiss of sound. A noose, deftly thrown, settled over Ragan's shoulders and immediately was tightened. He heard the drumming of a horse being spurred into motion. The rope bit into his arms. He was jerked from the wagon seat, and the speed of that running horse kept the rope taut, turned Ragan's body in the air and he slapped the ground. He hit with such force that his brain seemed to explode. Dimly he heard Madge scream. The rest of it was a dream, a nightmare that couldn't really happen to a man. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Ham-Strung

RAGAN never knew how long it lasted, the thorny brush, the hard-baked ground, ripping, grinding, hammering. There was a period when he seemed suspended in space, floating. There was an interminable time when he was swimming upward through smothering water. Then someone seemed to be moving around him with a pear burner, searing his flesh. His entire body seemed on fire.

"He's coming out of it," a voice said as from a distance. "Stop cryin', girl. He's all right."

"You dirty cowards!"

Ragan opened his eyes. Yellow lamplight sent pain rocketing through his head, but he held his eyes open and when the room stopped spinning he saw Madge Dunham sitting on the bare boards of a well bunk. Her hands were behind her, no doubt tied. A bandanna blindfold covered her eyes. As Ragan watched, her shoulders stopped shaking and she asked, "Clark! Can you hear me, Clark?"

"Sure he can!" said a voice that sounded queer to Ragan. The voice made a chuckling sound. There was something vicious in the sound.

Ragan turned his head a trifle, setting his teeth against the pain that went jolting through neck muscle and bone. He saw one man leaning against the wall, near an open door, watching him from beneath the brim of a gray sombrero. He saw another man, leg over knee, lounging on a bunk opposite the girl, watching him from beneath the brim of a black sombrero. Both men wore bandannas to mask their faces.

"Take it off, Birk," Ragan said to the man on the bunk. "You're worse than an ostrich, with his head under his wing, sayin', "Now find me!"

Simms Birk got up from the bunk. Ragan sat propped against the room's back wall, and Birk's long legs carried him there in four or five strides. With his right hand he slapped Ragan across the face.

"You might get away with that, Birk," Ragan said steadily. "In this country, you'll never in God's world get away with manhandlin' a woman. You know that, don't you? Let her go."

"Soon as we're finished here," Simms Birk said. "And all she'll be able to tell anyone is that some masked men jumped you. It was dark. She was blindfolded. She couldn't possibly identify a one of them."

"I can," Ragan said. "That hatchet blade over there is Muldrew. I could guess what happened to that arm he's got in a sling, just like I could make a good try at namin' the rest of your sorry outfit. Anyway, a man's not too particular in a bed of snakes."

Simms Birk chuckled. "Friend, your plans cover a heap of territory. The trouble is, you won't be around to carry 'em out." And again he rocked Ragan's head with a vicious slap.

Ragan stared up at the man steadily. His .45 was missing. His body felt as if it had been scrubbed with sandpaper. At his wrists and along the knuckles of his hands bare bone showed through. This bunkhouse, he realized now, was on the old Curry Comb spread that Clayton Masters had taken over some years ago. It was off the River Road about half a mile, and the way Ragan felt he must have been dragged over every foot of that distance. But as he watched the black shine of Birk's eyes, above the bandanna mask, a reckless and savage anger boiled up inside him. This was one man he wanted to kill.

Muldrew, from the doorway, called, "Maybe our friend would like to see the show. The boys just set it off!"

Birk crossed to the door and stood beside Muldrew, peering out. Ragan didn't move. He didn't need to. Through the narrow window at the foot of the bunk where Madge sat, he could see the yellow glow above the mes-

quite tops. And that glow, to Ragan, represented a lot more than a hundred and fifty gallons of gasoline going up in flame and smoke. It represented struggle and heartbreak and blasted hopes. It was a mockery of a bunch of little ranchers who had fought to hold their land and their cattle, and who now would be stripped by Clayton Masters, shamed and beaten.

Fay Yarber, Ragan thought bitterly, had played her part well. Like a fool, he had read that note. He had trusted her, and driven right into this trap. Fay and Luke Vastine both must be laughing!

The scuff of hoofs sounded outside, slowed, stopped. A voice that held a definite arrogance, the voice of Clayton Masters, called, "All finished, and I'm heading back to town! You know what horse to put the girl on, the unbranded one. Hurry it up before that blaze draws company."

"Won't take but a minute, boss," Simms Birk declared. "This night's work ought to convert all the hold-out sons!"

Clayton Masters, sounding hugely pleased, said, "Yes, by God!" His horse started up, making a lonesome, fading rataplan in the night.

Simms Birk said, "Put her on the horse, Muldrew. I've got a piece of business here that needs to be done in private."

"I won't!" Madge cried fiercely. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Sho', now," Birk said to soothe her; but his voice held an undertone that was an ugly thing to hear. "Don't make us have to carry you."

Muldrew grasped the girl's arm and headed her for the door. "Clark!" she half sobbed. "If anything happens—"

Simms Birk was watching Ragan, his eyes black in the lamplight. "If anything happens," he said softly, and made a chuckling sound.

THERE was a litter of straw and dry leaves and yellowed pages of newspapers in the corner opposite the door. Birk lifted the lamp from the packing-box table and carefully placed it on the floor near the corner, talking as he worked.

"Boys keep this place a little untidy. Use it once in a while for a storm shelter and for some of our night deals. Too bad. Be inconvenient, but the shack has to go."

He rolled a piece of newspaper, held it over the smoked lamp chimney, and when it burst into flame he tossed it into the littered corner. Almost immediately the straw and leaves were blazing, the hot yellow tongues seeking moisture from the warped boards and finding none.

"Take it a couple minutes to reach the lamp," Birk murmured. "Then the explosion. Then, ashes. But you won't be worryin' about that, Ragan. You won't even feel it when you burn."

He was moving toward Ragan, not hurrying. Captured rays from the guttering flames behind him flickered along the blued steel barrel of the six-shooter in Birk's hand and did an unholy dance in the man's eyes. He stopped a couple of yards from Ragan. Slowly, deliberately, as if he savored this moment, he started his hand upward with the gun.

"Now, damn you, we'll be even!" Birk's voice shook with emotion.

There was that pause, then, when the .45 steadied, pointing at Ragan like a long blue finger; when Ragan gathered his energies for one last desperate effort, and knew he would lose. . . .

"You, Birk! Drop that gun!"

Birk didn't turn, but his eyes flicked away from Ragan, flicked back. The high heels of Ragan's boots caught him in stomach and groin. Ragan had his arms and shoulders braced against the wall; after all the happenings of this night he was utterly without mercy, and the force behind those spiked heels slammed Birk backward. He groaned his anguish, dust rose from the floor in puffs, and Simms Birk lay still. Ragan was on him like a cat. He scooped up the gun that had fallen from Birk's hand. He had hold of the barrel, so he swung the butt against Birk's head and it struck with an ugly sound. Ragan shoved the gun inside his waistband.

The whole far end of the room was in flames. Through the heated, smoky air the girl in the doorway seemed to shimmer. Ragan took two strides toward her, turned, grasped Simms Birk by the boots and dragged him that way, out the door.

The girl ran after Ragan, pulling at his arm, saying, "Clark! He intended to kill you, Clark!"

Yonder, the glow of the burning gasoline still lit the sky, and from that direction came shrill yells, a rattle of shots. Ragan let Birk's legs drop. He stared at the girl's pale-limned face and asked, "Why, Fay? Why did you come?" Without waiting for her answer, he whirled and went at a lurching run toward the dark wall of live oaks that marked the Nueces. To his ears now came only an occasional *spang* of rifle or deeper-throated pistol shot.

Breathing hard, Ragan pulled up in sight of the burning wagon. The iron drums had been overturned in the wagon box, the plugs unscrewed, the spilled gasoline ignited. By now most of the gasoline had burned away, and as Ragan stared, the charred framework of the wagon buckled, dumping the empty drums on the ground and sending up a burst of scintillating sparks. Ragan sighed and was turn-

ing away when, at his shoulder, a voice spoke with quiet satisfaction.

"It cost me a wagon, but it was worth it. We put the fear of black gunpowder in those sorry-livered sons!"

Ragan swung around wearily to see the kind eyes and the graying neatly-clipped mustache of Walt Dunham, the storekeeper. In a voice that held little interest, he asked, "How come you here, Walt?"

"Why, because fat Cy Dowdy, from Del Valle, near rode a horse to death to fetch me, son. After you went through this morning, Fay Yarber came to his store and left you a note. Then Simms Birk and a couple more blacklegs showed up and made Cy let 'em read the note. Cy could guess what would happen then, but he couldn't warn you. No, by thunder, because Birk left a man to watch him, and when Cy gave you the note that tarantula had a gun lined on his back from inside the store. So after the gentleman left, Cy hit for Nueces and we rounded up some of the boys and—yonder they come now!"

They reined up and sat their saddles, grinning down at Ragan. Old Julio, little Andy Witton, Reed Bowman, fat Cy Dowdy—they were all here, and the entire group was in high good humor. Ragan couldn't understand it.

"Well, I reckon you had fun while it lasted!" he greeted them sourly. "How many redskins bit the dust? And how do you figure to replace those thirty pear burners that got melted down?"

Old Julio pushed out his chest. "Ho!" he said proudly. "This cripple-wing Muldrew will make no more devilment. I put the lead slug through the front and the back of him. He rides with Miss Madge right in the middle of us!"

"He's the only one we downed," Andy Witton admitted soberly. "If Masters was in on this, we let him get away. But we made a start, anyhow! Boys"—with a broad wink—"I feel like a little fishin' trip would do us all good."

And without another word the whole bunch reined around and rode toward the river.

Ragan stared after them, puzzled and frowning. The voice of Fay Yarber, at his shoulder, brought him slowly around.

"Clark, I'm sorry this happened. I'm sorry for a lot of things, Clark. Can't we at least be friends?"

"How," Ragan asked bluntly, "did you know about the trap?"

"Some men find me—attractive, Clark. Dee Russel, who rides for us, overheard Birk making his plans. He told me." She came closer. She caught his arms and looked up at him. "Clark, when I—when Luke came here, I thought you were dead. I was lonesome, and I guess I was hurt. Because you didn't have to go away to Cuba, and leave me. You just wanted the excitement. And the glory. Clark, can't we try again?"

HER hair, loose around her shoulders, was shining gold in the moonlight. Her almond eyes were turned dark from the feeling that possessed her. She was, Ragan thought, a composite of all the women from Eve down to the present time who had made the conquest of men a profession, enticing them, tiring of them, then casting them aside. Women like her, Ragan told himself, caused half the trouble in the universe. A sense of freedom, a sense of release swept over Ragan; and because he remembered all those lonely nights in Cuba, when every fiber in his being cried out for this woman, he wanted to laugh. He started to laugh—then he saw the dark, lean man reining up and staring as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

Ragan pulled Fay Yarber close against him, roughly, and kissed her and held his lips on hers for a long time. A hand clamped his shoulder and hauled him around, and he saw Luke Vastine, down from the saddle, with his thin lips stretched crooked and taut, not handsome now but showing the cruelty that lay beneath his skin.

Ragan laughed, then. He said softly, "You can have her, Luke. And welcome!"

"Damn you, Ragan!" Luke Vastine's voice was hoarse. His lean hand gripped the handle of his gun.

"Uh-unh, Luke." Ragan shook his head. "This isn't the time. When the time does come, we won't fight over a woman. I'm disappointed. Even in you, I'm disappointed. A Rough Rider, mixing in a sneak deal like this."

"I wasn't in on it. I merely saw the blaze," Vastine declared. His gaze slid away from Ragan, briefly; and that moment of uncertainty told Regan all he needed to know.

"You're lying," he said. "Just like you lied and cheated to get my ranch."

Then he saw how bitter anger had sharpened Fay Yarber's face, pulling her eyelids together, tightening her lips. And he understood this: She was a woman scorned; she regretted now that she had picked Luke Vastine, for she knew him for what he was, and she realized, too, that both he and Ragan held her in contempt and that she had lost both of them.

Luke Vastine was staring at her with something like hatred in his eyes; and that was another thing Ragan could understand. For Luke Vastine was a proud man, proud of his conquests. What he had seen here had cheapened Fay Yarber in his eyes. She was no longer a rich and hard-to-get prize. She was

a woman who would have switched and taken Clark Ragan back again. Luke Vastine did not want her.

Ragan turned away, feeling pretty good. Then he saw Madge Dunham, with her back toward him, standing beside her father. Her head was high, her shoulders stiffly square. As Ragan watched, they began shaking.

He took a step toward her, then he stopped and stood entirely still, held by a wonderment that wouldn't let him believe his eyes.

Five men had driven up in a two-seated buggy, with old Branch Yarber handling the reins. Two of the men, strangers to Ragan, wore six-shooters and big white hats. They stepped down from the back seat, keeping Clayton Masters between them; and the banker's heavy face wore a set and ugly scowl. But Ragan gave these men, and Branch Yarber, only a fleeting glance, because stepping toward him with his hand outstretched was a small man wearing spectacles and mustache and a warm and unforgettable smile.

"Ragan! It's good to see you," he said; and there was no mistaking the warmth of his handclasp.

There was an immense vitality about him, a quality of leadership that made people forget his size. Ragan felt like hugging him. Even Luke Vastine stepped forward.

"Colonel!" he cried, and held out his hand.

The little man made no move to grip it. He stared steadily at Luke Vastine, and when he turned his shoulder to him it was as if he had slapped him across the face.

"I got your telegram this morning," he told Ragan. "Just had time to catch the train. I haven't forgotten that sniper you plucked off—up in a tree, remember? You saved my good health, if not my life, and this looked like a chance to repay you."

Clayton Masters, between the two men with the big white hat and the big pistols, growled, "And I won't forget this—this indignity, either, Colonel. It's apt to cost you quite a few votes! I'm a substantial, an influential citizen in this country. I was riding to town—"

"Yeah!" old Branch Yarber snarled. "You was ridin'! You was ridin' like the' was fire under yo' tail! You're a damned crook, Masters, and you near got me into your crooked business. But you're at the end of yo' rope. You know why? Because my rider, Dee Russel, heard Simms Birk plannin' this night's business and callin' you boss. Because, Masters"—lowering his voice to a confidential tone—"you know who these fellers are flankin' you, besides being Teddy's bodyguards? They're Hall and Meacham, of the Texas Rangers, and Dee Russel is going to give 'em an earful!"

"You can't prove a thing!" Masters declared. "You—Master stopped talking."

The voice wasn't loud, but there was a whining, animal-like undertone to it that pulled everybody around. It said, "Let me see your face, Ragan!"

Simms Birk stood about ten feet from Ragan, his shoulder almost touching Luke Vastine's. The blood on his contorted face looked black in the moonlight. His eyes were murderous. He held a stubby pistol, and the click it made as his thumb pulled back the hammer was a definite and wicked sound.

Madge screamed. The weapon exploded with a spiteful pop. And Ragan was flat on the ground. Simms Birk was pulling down on him for a second shot when Luke Vastine's shoulder jolted him and turned him half around.

"You doublecrossin'—"

Birk's voice rose to a scream; he was a man gone mad. He shoved the stubby gun so close to Vastine's chest that cloth and flesh muffled its sound. A .45 roared and Birk fell across the legs of Luke Vastine, both of them lying still.

Ranger Hall stayed beside Clayton Masters. Ranger Meacham stepped forward with the six-shooter he had used yet ready in his hand.

Ragan pushed up to his all fours. Hands caught his arms and helped him to his feet. He looked to his right and saw Teddy Roosevelt. He looked to his left and saw Madge. Both of them, in unison, asked, "Are you all right?"

Ragan nodded, and his neck began to hurt.

"Clark!" Madge said. "Oh, Clark, I thought—"

"Pshaw!" Colonel Teddy said. "You can't kill a Rough Rider!"

THEY went over to where Ranger Meacham knelt beside Simms Birk. Meacham rose, his face grim. "He's dead," he told them. "He did some talkin', though. Plenty!"

Ragan saw that Luke Vastine's eyes were open, dark pools against the gray of his face.

"That makes twice, Luke," he said quietly. "Why did you do it?"

Vastine's lips showed the ghost of a smile. "Because a man's a rascal," he murmured, "doesn't necessarily mean that he has no instincts of a gentleman. Birk was a rotter, anyhow."

"I came down here, Luke," Colonel Teddy said, "because Ragan wired me wanting to know the whereabouts of the two doctors who witnessed that shabby document you robbed Ragan with. I know where I can get hold of Captain Banning, but I wanted to talk to you first. As you say, it was hard for me to believe that one of my boys was an utter blackguard, with no instincts of a gentleman."

"It won't be necessary to contact Banning.

I may be a poor winner, Colonel, but I'm a good loser. It's taps for me. Lights out," Vastine said wearily. "I stole the ranch and the cattle from Ragan. I thought he was dying, anyway, so I wrote out a bill-of-sale instead of a will. This ought to straighten things—with all you for witnesses. I—" With one last burst of energy, he pushed up on his elbows. "Where—is—Fay?" Then he fell back.

But Fay was gone, no one knew where. Luke Vastine would never see her again. He had made his last conquest. . . .

And when Ragan turned away and saw old Julio, Andy Witton and the rest of them riding back, he could feel no more pity for Luke Vastine than he could for Clayton Masters, who now was arguing, half pleading with the two Texas Rangers. Masters' entire body seemed to have gone putty-soft, and he was no longer the assured banker, the arrogant cattle king. He was a man afraid for his life. The cigar between his fingers was cold, and when Ranger Meacham, in a disgusted tone, said, "Buck up, man! Maybe you won't get the rope," Masters let the cigar drop, and it was as if, suddenly, all the zest had gone out of his life.

Ragan felt tired to the marrow of his bones. Then old Julio was calling, "Ho, *hijo*! How like you these nice fish we take from the river?"

And as Ragan stared at those men, each with a couple of pear burners across his saddle, little Andy Witton said, "They were sinkin' our pear burners in the river when we rode up on 'em. Reckon Masters couldn't see his ways to destroyin' good property, even if it wasn't his. We damn well fished up every born one!"

Ragan wanted to shout. A voice beside him said, "I still don't have any faith in those contraptions, but I got money in a San Antonio bank. I'll buy cottonseed cake to go along with the pear. I'll even buy more pear burners, if Witton and them will let me help. I been a damned fool, Ragan. You s'pose the boys will—you reckon I've got a friend left in the whole country?"

There was no doubting Yarber's sincerity. He looked, Ragan thought, as pleading and humble as any small boy in deep trouble. Ragan laid a hand on his shoulder. "I reckon, Branch, a man is entitled to make one mistake."

Andy Witton cried, "It's Colonel Teddy! Make us a speech, Teddy!"

"I'll make a swap with you," said Colonel Teddy. "They tell me that down in this country the white-tailed deer grow big as buffalo. Gentlemen, before I tell you my plans for a canal to run across the Isthmus of Panama. . . ."

Ragan heard little of this. Ragan's long legs were taking him toward Madge Dunham and the promise he saw in her eyes. Later, he was thinking, he might add a wing to his ranchhouse. But right now there was a drought to beat, there was work to do, and he was eager to get at that work. The long months in the hospital, the heart-ache, the blasted hopes—all these memories fell away from him. He knew at last that a Rough Rider had come home.

THE END

BLOOD-MONEY GUNSLINGER
Walt Coburn

Fay Adkins, killer, lined up four empty .45 shells and two .30-30's on the green baize-covered poker table. "Those," Adkins grinned, pointing at the carbine shells, "are Nig Edwards and Pancho Malone. I'll collect the fightin' wages they had comin'." Then he pointed at the .45's and spoke again—and all the devils in hell laughed as they listened. . . .

HELL-ON-WHEELS, FRESNO BOUND!
Rod Patterson

THE GUN-BUM COMES HOME
Marvin De Vries

Coburn's smashing Frontier novel and the vivid novelettes by De Vries and Patterson are only three of the hard-punching, colorful yarns to be found in the thrill-packed March issue of *Dime Western*.

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'WAY FOR THE ★ ★ ★ HELL-BOUND FREIGHTERS!

Vigorous Novel Of Whang-Leather Teamsters

By Hamp Scribner

CHAPTER ONE

Bust-Up at Devil's Elbow

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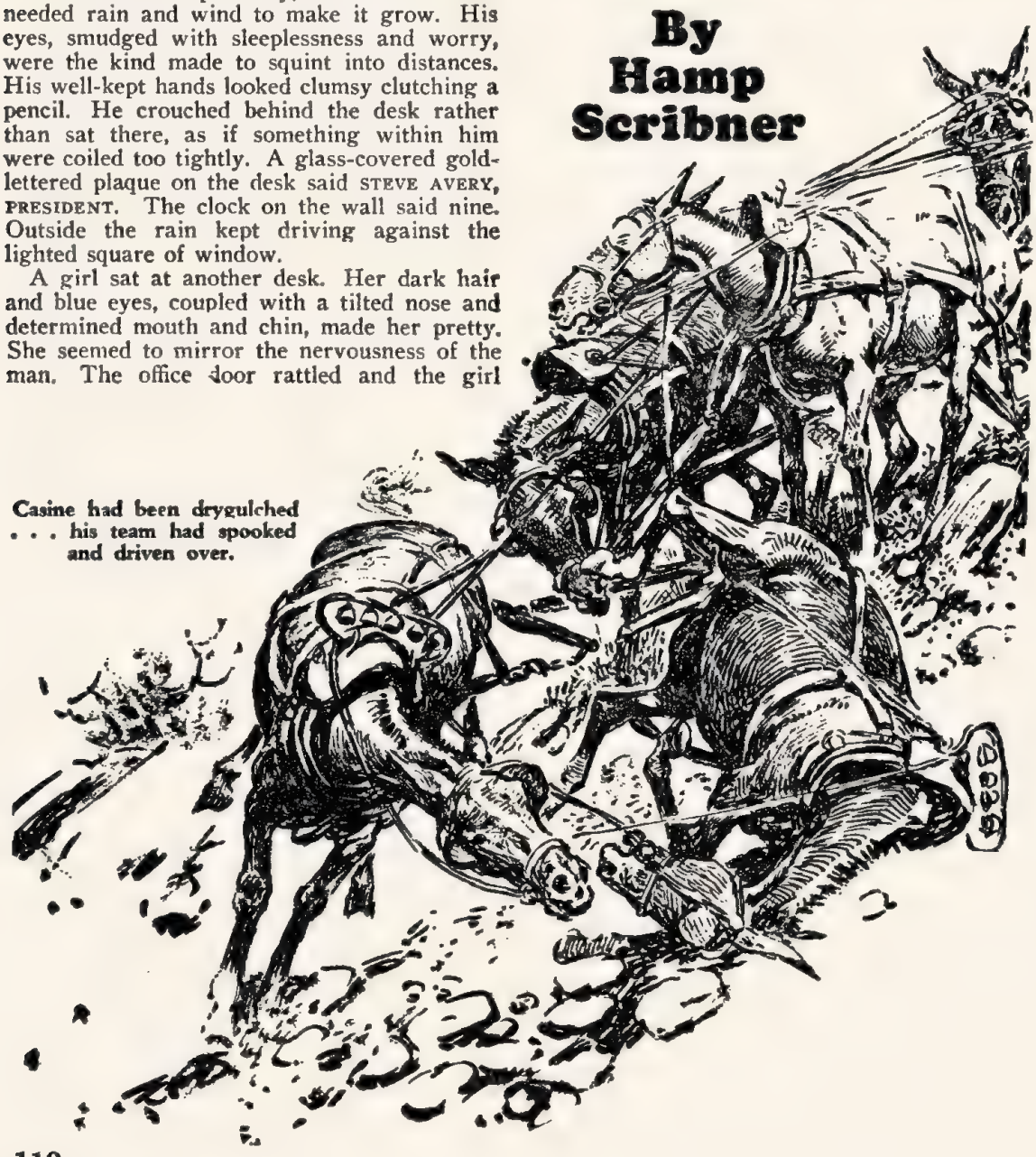
A girl sat at another desk. Her dark hair and blue eyes, coupled with a tilted nose and determined mouth and chin, made her pretty. She seemed to mirror the nervousness of the man. The office door rattled and the girl



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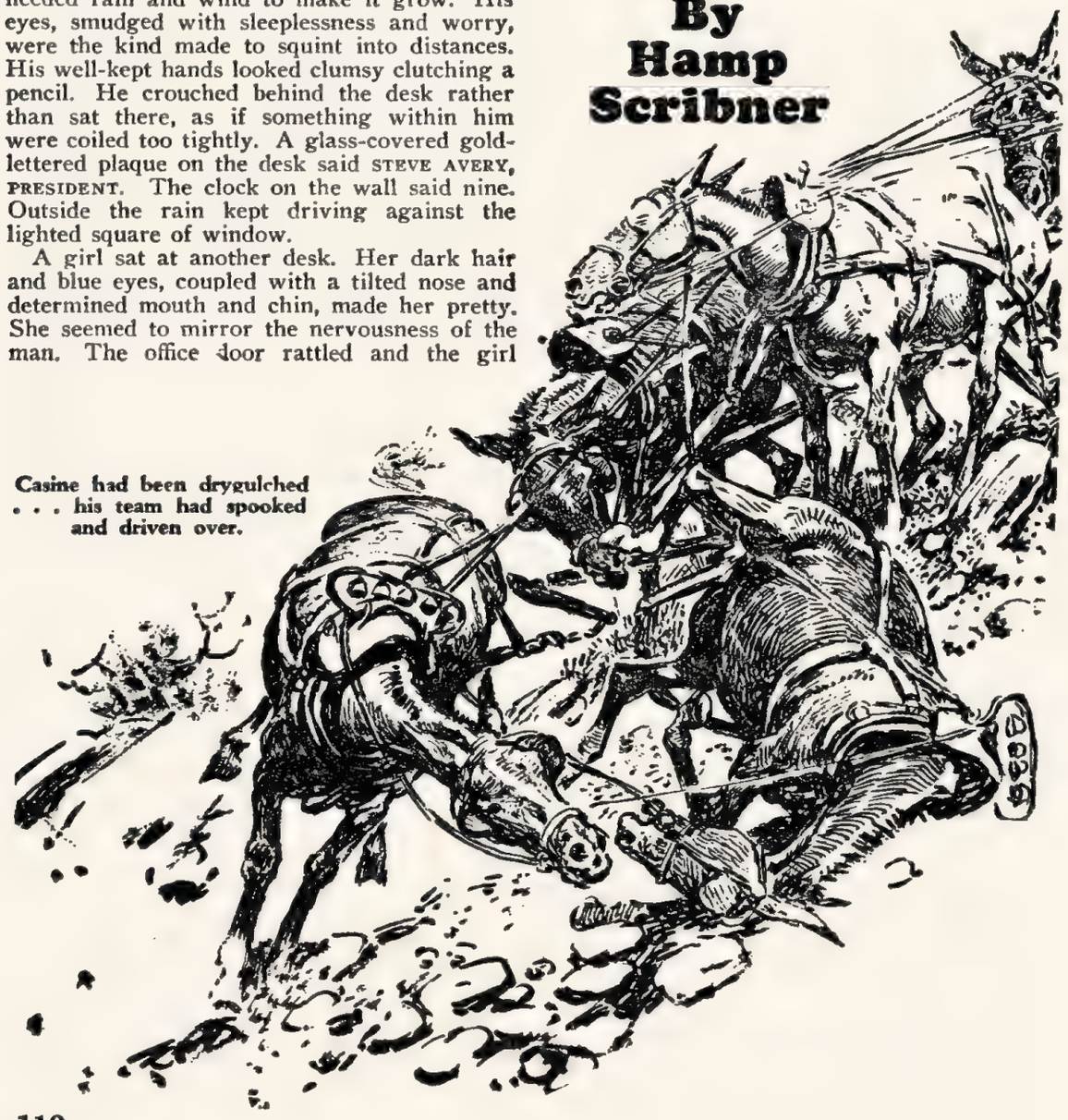

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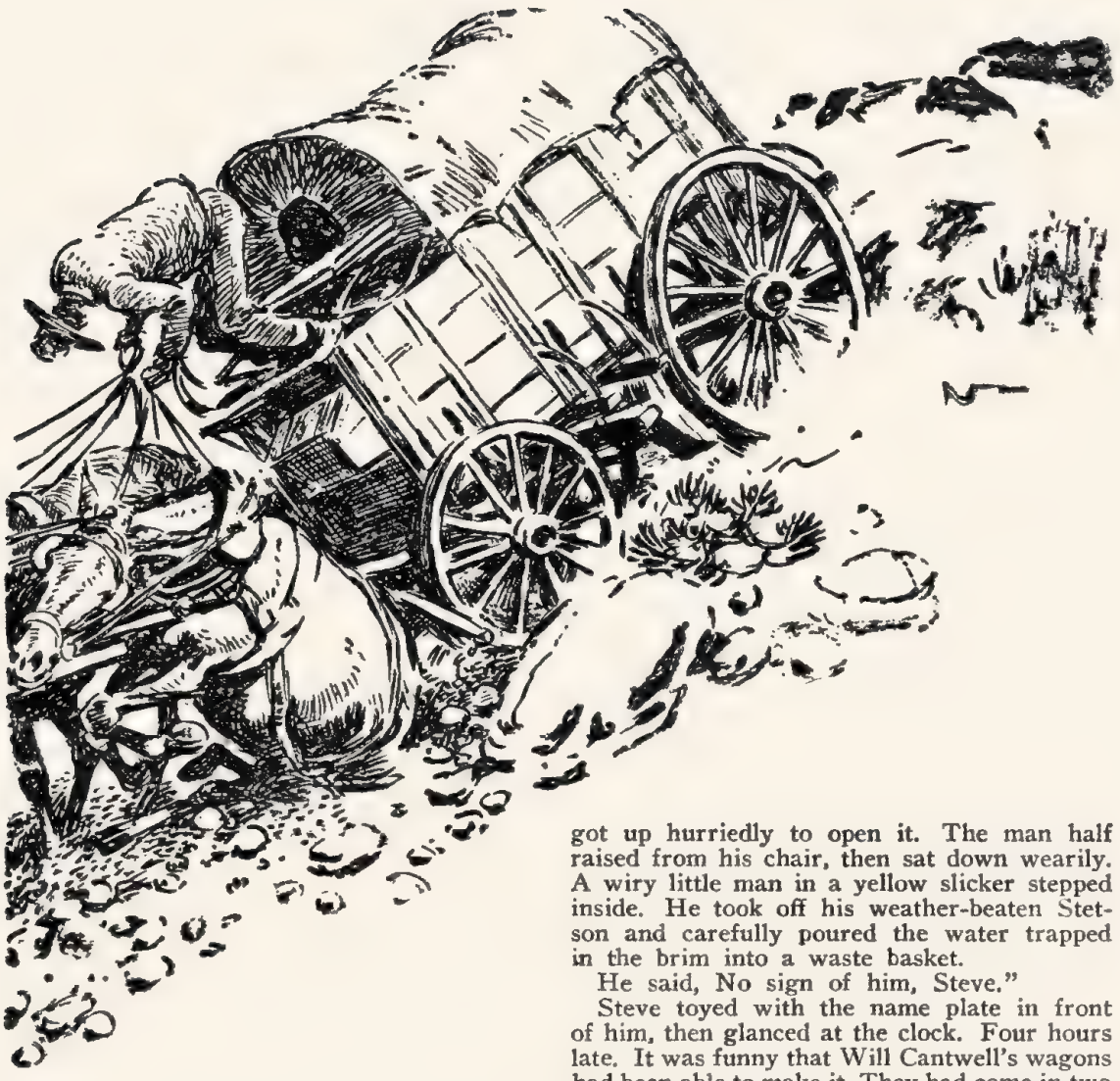
got up hurriedly to open it. The man half raised from his chair, then sat down wearily. A wiry little man in a yellow slicker stepped inside. He took off his weather-beaten Stetson and carefully poured the water trapped in the brim into a waste basket.

He said, No sign of him, Steve."

Steve toyed with the name plate in front of him, then glanced at the clock. Four hours late. It was funny that Will Cantwell's wagons had been able to make it. They had come in two hours ago, heavily loaded, and Jake Traegor, boss driver for Cantwell, had wasted no time coming by the Avery Freight Line office here to let Steve Avery know. Jake Traegor would be out now telling a lot of people that when they had the Cantwell line haul their stuff it got through.

It was this sort of thing that was making Steve Avery old for his twenty-six years. Steve looked at the girl, still standing by the door, then at the pint-sized redhead who had come in out of the rain. The redhead had taken off his slicker and straddled a chair and was now studiously pounding loose tobacco out of a harmonica. He gave a couple of preliminary reedy wails, beat the instrument against the heel of his hand and said, "Jake Traegor is spreading it around that our driver was afraid to come over the pass tonight."

Avery said, "Let him talk. Nobody pays



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any attention to Traegor and his windies."

The girl turned suddenly, her back against the door. There was fire in her eyes and her voice was sharp and accusing. "Nobody pays any attention to Jake Traegor," she mocked. "Jake Traegor is only a teamster. He's not a big business man like Will Cantwell or Steve Avery." Her breasts, full and firm under the square-cut neckline of her dress, rose and fell with fury that seemed about to burst into violence. "Then how come we used to pay so much attention to Jake Traegor?" she accused hotly. "Has he changed too, now that Lenore Cantwell has decided to roll her big brown eyes at you?"

Avery got up from his chair; his hands were pressed against the top of the desk. He said, "Cut that out, Mary, will you?"

The man with the harmonica put the instrument back in his pocket and said, "Ain't we got trouble enough without you two fightin'?"

Avery stood there a minute as if undecided whether he should say more or not. Then he fished in his pocket and took out a silver dollar. He tossed it to the little man. "Go up to the Chink's and get us some sandwiches and a pot of coffee, will you, Harmony?"

"Sure," Harmony said. "Might do us good." He pulled on his slicker and set the battered Stetson on his head. At the door he paused and gave Mary's arm a squeeze, then went out into the rainy night.

THERE was a long silence after he left, then Mary said, "I'm sorry, Steve."

"You needn't be," Avery said. "You and me been saying what we thought to each other for a long time now."

"It's just that things are so darn different, Steve," the girl said, coming closer to him. "You're different, too."

"A man has to grow up," he said.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him. "I remember when I was just a kid in pigtails and you and Harmony had the only wagons running to Quartzite. Mom used to let me peek through the stairs back of the bar there when you'd come in. We could set the clock by you and Harmony, Steve, and there wasn't a man this side of hell that could stop you coming through. That's what you used to say yourself."

"And I never had a nickel in my pocket," Steve Avery reminded.

"But you had something else, Steve. Can't you see that? You were—well, you were you. You weren't tangled up with a bunch like Cantwell and Traegor."

"Look, Mary," Steve said patiently. "I'm not tangled up with them. I've told you that a hundred times. I've still got my business, ain't I? It's just that Quartzite has grown up. There's room for more than one freight line. Cantwell and me have worked out a way that we both get our share."

"He got more than his share again tonight," Mary said. "Two wagons came in. Tony hasn't shown up yet, has he? How do you know he isn't over the cliff down there in the Gorge?"

"Tony probably got drunk."

"Steve," the girl said quietly, "you know that's not so and it's not like you to say it."

"All right, so it's not like me," he said hotly. "Nothing is like me. I suppose you'd like to go back to living in the rear end of a honkytonk and see me back to bullwhackin' so everything would be the same. Damn it, Mary, I told you I was goin' places in this town, didn't I? Now you stick to keepin' the books and I'll run the business!"

"You lose a few more accounts and there won't be any business," she said.

"Let me worry about that," he snapped.

Her voice was pleading. "I just don't want to see them make a jackass out of you, Steve." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Steve, I don't know what she's done to you or said to you—"

Swift anger flooded his cheeks. "Maybe you wouldn't understand," he said. "She's used to nice things and she's got a right to want the man she's gonna marry to be more than a bullwhacker. She's a lady."

"Meaning I'm not, Steve?"

The anger left his face as quickly as it had come. He came around and put his hand on her arm. "I didn't mean that, Mary. You know I didn't."

She shook off his hand. "I'm going," she said. She went to the huge bentwood hall tree and took her coat. He went to her quickly, concern in his eyes.

"You're not figurin' on quittin' me Mary?" That was suddenly very important.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not quitting you, Steve. Maybe I'm not a fine lady like Lenore Cantwell. My mom ran a saloon and I was born on top of a whiskey barrel. But my mom taught me that only rats desert a sinking ship. I'll be back in the morning." She hurried out the door and as she left he thought he heard a quick sob. The door opened and Harmony shouldered his way in, a paper sack in one hand, a coffee pot in the other.

Avery said, "I don't know what's getting into that girl."

Harmony sat the coffee pot on the desk and went to a small cupboard to get the cups. He said, "Well if you don't there's no sense of me tellin' you."

Avery made no reply to that. There were getting to be too many things to which there were no answers. Such as old accounts suddenly making mistakes on the printed schedules and throwing loads to Cantwell's wagons. Such as Tony Casine not making it over the

pass tonight. Casine was a top-notch man.

He said, "See Jake up town, Harmony?"

The little redhead blew across his coffee cup and smacked his lips. "Lit up like a Christmas tree," he said. He reached over and took a thick sandwich from the paper bag. His hand stopped and his eyes met Steve's. "He's offering hundred dollar bets that our wagon don't come over the pass tonight."

"He must feel pretty sure," Steve said.

Harmony said, "Yeah, he must."

They sat there silently, the ticking of the clock making the only noise in the room, and the sudden soggy thud of running horses in the street was twice as loud because of their own silence. There was the pound of boots on the boardwalk, then the loud banging on the door. Harmony got up quickly and opened the door.

The man who stood there was covered with mud, his black beard caked with it. The rain streamed down across his heavy face and dripped from his chin. He didn't bother to come in but said bluntly, "I jest come up the Gorge, Avery. If you was expectin' a wagon, it won't be here. She's splintered to hell on the rocks a hundred foot below the road at Devil's Elbow!"

CHAPTER TWO

Dry-Gulch

STEVE AVERY didn't remember if he even thanked the man. He didn't have to ask if Tony Casine was all right or if the mules had been saved. He knew. He and Harmony had made too many trips over that treacherous one-way grade to have to ask. The cliff on the point of Devil's Elbow rose sharply to a hundred feet, dropping away on either side of the turn. On the river side it was a sheer five-hundred-foot drop to the broiling waters of the Kern and the jagged rocks. It was a spot that teamsters woke up at night sometimes and thought about.

He grabbed a slicker off the hall tree, slammed a battered hat on his head, then went out on the street, Harmony following at his heels. Even knowing, a man had to be sure. Miracles sometimes happened. Casine had been with him a long time. These thoughts kept going around in his head as he hurried to the brightly lighted Nugget up the street.

News of the accident had gone there before him; he could tell it by the swell of voices when he kicked open the storm doors. It was in the eyes of the men who turned now to face him and Harmony. He stood there by the door, the light from the overheard lamps cutting glistening streaks on his slicker.

He said, "I'll be going down there. I may need help."

There were maybe twenty men in the saloon. Three of them were Steve's own men, two drivers and a blacksmith. The rest were loggers, mill men, or miners, and down at the end of the bar was Jake Traegor with the Cantwell drivers and his usual compliment of hangers-on. Jake weaved away from the bar and pushed himself heavily out into the room.

He swayed as he stood there, piggish eyes blinking against the smoky light. His black hair was tousled and his thick lips hung loose and moist like the lips of a man who is fast losing control of his faculties from too much drink. He had taken off his coat and loosened his shirt and as he stood there, teetering back on his heels, he looked not unlike a dehorned white-faced bull masquerading as a man.

His voice was thick when he said, "What's the matter, pretty boy? Them wagons of yours jest fair weather wagons?" He laughed at his own joke, but no one joined him. He stood there blinking, then a sudden light broke over his face. "Hey, by God," he roared, "I made some bets around here, didn't I? Anybody say I didn't make some bets? Start payin' off, you scum bums. Jake Traegor's buyin' drinks for the house?"

The bartender, Mulrooney, a moon-faced bald-headed Irishman said, "Quiet down now, Jake. This ain't the time to be startin' of nothin'." Traegor came up the bar toward Steve and Harmony, jostling rudely against men as he did, pausing slightly as if hoping someone would make something of it. When he was near Steve he stopped, pushed two men out of the way and bellied up to the bar. He took the first bottle he saw and drank deeply from it. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve he turned to Steve and said, "What you got to say about it, pretty boy?"

"That you must of been damn sure Tony wouldn't make it tonight," Steve said softly.

"Sure, why not?" Jake said, sobering some. "That broken-down riggin' of yours ain't fit to haul chicken feed." He leaned forward and jabbed his finger against Steve's chest. "And people are findin' it out, see?" he said owlishly. "This ain't gonna help you none." Steve backed away from the man's breath. Jake, taking it as an admission that Steve didn't want trouble, laughed loudly, then said to the room, "Damn nice of Tony to break his blasted neck so I could win my bets, wasn't it? Only time in his life he ever done me a favor."

"Shut up, Traegor!" Avery's voice cut like a whip.

Traegor stepped away from the bar, huge hands swinging at his side. "Don't tell me to shut up, Avery," he said bluntly. "I say what I please when I please. I don't like you nor none of your crew, see? And I'll—"

Avery hit him in the mouth.

IT WAS a short blow, hampered by Steve's slicker, but it was enough to send Traegor back, clutching at the bar. His hand closed on a bottle and he swung it around, the whiskey sloshing down his shirt front. Steve drove in and sank his fist in the big man's middle. Two Cantwell drivers ran up and held Traegor's arms. He jerked away and sent them sprawling. He wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "I been waitin' a long time for this, Avery."

Steve was trying to shake out of his slicker, Harmony helping him, when Traegor's fist struck him on the side of the head. His knees buckled and a dozen sounds set up a hammering in his head. Then he was free of the slicker and his short uppercut caught Traegor on the chin.

Jake stumbled half way across the room, crashing into a table and set of chairs. For a second he stood there, shaking his head. Then he snatched up a chair and threw it. It missed Steve and smashed into bottles and glasses on the back bar.

Steve threw himself across the room at the swaying Traegor. His fists ripped into Jake's face, short, stabbing, punishing blows. Jake fought back, but there was no pain in the blows to Avery. That would come later, he knew. Muck-covered miners, calked-booted loggers, callous-handed teamsters or professional barroom brawlers—Steve Avery had fought them all in his time. He had thought he was through with it, and he had told Lenore Cantwell as much, but now that he was in it again only the thought of coming out on top mattered.

He snapped Jake's head back with a quick, chopping right. He followed quickly with a left. He got in another right and Jake's head jerked up, his hands dropped. It was the second Steve Avery had waited for. His fist smashed Traegor's bloody face. Jake tripped against the table, fell back, then rolled off, his body smashing a chair. Avery turned and took his slicker from Harmony's outstretched hand.

A dozen men, including Steve's crew of three, started toward the door. As they passed they spoke in choppy sentences. "Meet you here, Steve," one said. "I'll fetch my buckboard," another offered. One of his drivers asked, "Shall I get some ropes up at the barn?" Steve nodded, then he went outside where the damp air was good in his lungs.

He was suddenly tired, and there was a weakness in his arms and legs. He leaned against a post of the saloon porch, drinking in great gulps of the night air. He hardly saw the storm-curtained buggy that pulled up near him, the light from the saloon glistening on its sleek black paint. But he heard the voice that called his name.

She didn't give him a chance to answer. "Steve, where on earth have you been?" she asked. "Don't you know we were expecting you at nine? Steve, I had friends over to meet you. How do you think I feel, coming out here looking for you like this? Steve, will you please come over here so that I don't have to yell like a fishwife?"

He went over to the buggy. She had unsnapped one of the side curtains now and was holding it back with a gloved hand. He said, "I'm sorry, Lenore. There's been an accident."

"Yes, I heard," she said impatiently. "Well, there's nothing you can do now. Get in here—*Steve! You've been fighting!*"

He could feel the warmth of her through the open curtain, could smell the scent she wore. It set up a nagging confusion within him, just as it always did. When he was near her he felt his clothes should be better, his surroundings more elegant. Along with that came a helplessness such as he had never known, coupled with a blind desire to do anything to make her happy. He tried to get rid of the feeling. He said, "We'll be out most of the night, I guess."

She said, "Steve, you promised me you'd stay out of trouble. Is this all your promises mean? Steve, where are you going?"

"I told you there'd been an accident," he said over his shoulder. He could hear her quick little snort of disgust and her voice was sharp when she spoke to the horse. The buggy turned in the street and drove quickly back toward the outskirts of town. He felt the light tug on his sleeve. He turned and saw Mary standing there.

She said, "Don't worry about it, Steve. You can explain to her in the morning."

He said, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going along, Steve," she said softly. "Tony was a friend of mine. I've got some wood and a couple of big coffee pots. The men will need coffee."

He didn't protest. Someone had led a horse up and handed the reins to him. He saw Mary climb into a buckboard alongside Harmony. The little cavalcade headed down the muddy street toward the freight road through the Gorge where the waters churned black five hundred feet below Devil's Elbow.

And as they rode into the night, the rain driving into their faces, Steve Avery spoke to no one. That turmoil that had been his since the night Lenore Cantwell had first smiled at him was strong now. She never seemed to understand him completely, and he knew he had never understood her. But when she was near him, when he held her in his arms, all

that seemed to disappear. Sometimes he wondered if he were going crazy.

TONIGHT when he had felt his fists smashing Traegor's face he had felt savagely that this was only the beginning—that he should go on with it—include Will Cantwell himself. It had been a passing whim, spawned by violence. Later, when he had heard her voice, it had passed completely. There was no anger in him at the way she had spoken. She had a right to be upset. The mournful strains of Harmony's mouth organ came drifting back to him. It made him think of Mary.

That jerked him to his senses quick. He wondered suddenly why he hadn't made her stay back tonight. This was no place for a woman. It just seemed natural that Mary should be here. He shook his head and gave up trying to think. But he couldn't put Mary completely out of his mind.

She was a lot like her mother had been, Mary was. Belle Collins had carried right on with the Silver Star after her husband got killed. She had run it high, wide and handsome and said to hell with public opinion, but there wasn't a man could say she wasn't a mother to Mary. She had even sent her away to school and Steve remembered now that one night Belle had told him she hoped in a way Mary didn't come back. She said maybe it would be better like that.

But Mary came back and Steve noticed only that she had grown up a lot. He had met Lenore Cantwell by then and he was in the middle of working out his schedules with Lenore's father. But he was glad Mary had learned to keep books in school. Now he was letting her come out on a night like this, saying it felt natural she should be here. Maybe it was because Belle had asked him to look out for Mary the night Belle died.

The towering rock cliff that marked Devil's Elbow was there ahead. He rode up and told Harmony to let Mary out before taking the buckboard any closer.

He had them tie a rope under his arms and lower him down the cliff near where the broken brush and loosened boulders told them the wagon had gone over. "I'll give three yanks on the rope if I need help," he said. "No use of more than one of us going down there."

He looped the end of a second rope through his belt so that they would have a way of bringing up what he found, then he pushed off his hat and slipped on the miner's cap with the carbide lamp that someone had been thoughtful enough to bring along. After that he lowered himself over the face of the cliff, grasping at anything to get a toe or hand hold, but depending mostly on the support of the rope under his arms. Below him the river pounded against the rocks as it rushed through the narrow passage.

Broken cases and a wheel told him when he had reached bottom; later he pressed against the yielding body of a dead mule. He signaled for them to slack off on the rope then, and he took matches from a waterproof case and got the carbide light going. In its blue-white beam he started picking his way slowly through the wreckage.

It was twenty feet from the main part of the wreckage that he found what he was looking for. Casine's body was draped across a rock. Half his slicker had been ripped away and his legs were twisted under him. Steve felt sudden nausea as he took the rope from his belt loop and fastened it around the broken body. He half packed, half dragged the dead man to a point more directly under where the men waited up on the roadway. Then he gave the signal to hoist away.

The body turned slowly against the face of the cliff as the rope lifted it clear. One arm drooped, the hand hanging as if pointing. The blood-streaked face was caught clearly in the beam of Steve's light. Steve felt the breath catch in his throat, then he leaned closer, giving a jerk on the rope, signaling the men to stop hauling away. Gingerly he pushed the matted hair away from the side of the dead man's head. There was a bullet hole just above the right ear.

For a long minute he stood there as the full import of that hit him. Casine hadn't slipped off the road. He had been dry-gulched, then his team had spooked and driven over. Steve jerked the rope again, then started his own ascent up the face of the cliff, slipping, sliding, tearing his hands, swinging off once into space, his full weight dangling from the rope that held him.

But he was thinking of other things when he finally clambered over the lip of the precipice onto the muddy road. There was a dull burning anger within him that kept growing and growing, shutting out everything else. He hardly noticed when Mary Collins came and pressed a tin cup of coffee into his hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Wagons for Hell

STEVE AVERY was at the Will Cantwell freight office early next morning. He had to wait nearly fifteen minutes before he saw the familiar buggy coming down the street. There was no anger in him now; just cold determination. He spoke curtly to the man who got out of the buggy, and when Will Cantwell opened the door with the key he carried on a gold chain Steve shouldered his way inside.

Cantwell was in his early fifties, well preserved, ruddy-cheeked, white muttonchop whiskers giving him an almost benign look. He removed his tall beaver hat and velvet collar coat and motioned to a chair. There was concern in his voice when he said, "Nasty business, that, last night, Steve. Terribly upset about it."

"Yeah," Avery said. "So am I. What do you intend to do about it?"

"Me?" Cantwell said, surprise arching his brows. "I don't follow you, Steve."

"Tony was murdered. Shot through the head."

Cantwell had just sat down, spreading his coattails out behind him. He got up slowly. His voice was hoarse with disbelief. "Murdered?" He let his mild blue eyes center on the rugged face of the man in front of him. His head began to nod, and he kept time, motioning with his right hand. He seemed to be having difficulty speaking.

Then he blurted, "Surely Steve—you don't think I—"

"Not you, Cantwell," Steve snapped. "You were here in town last night. I took the trouble to check. Jake Traegor."

Will Cantwell was no longer the befuddled man he had been before. The change in him was too abrupt to be convincing. He sat back down in his chair and took a cigar from a carved wooden box on his desk. He lit it, blew out a cloud of smoke. "That's a pretty nasty accusation, Steve."

Steve said, "I'm not asking you to get mixed up in that end of it."

"What *are* you asking?"

"Just what I got coming to me," Steve Avery said, leaning across the desk. "Ever since I entered into that agreement with you I've lost money. Drivers quit, wagons broke down, men I've hauled for for years suddenly decide they want your wagons handling their stuff."

Cantwell started to get up. Steve waved him back into his chair. "I'm not making threats nor accusations, Cantwell," Steve said, "but when we drew up that agreement it was to be for our mutual benefit. It ain't worked out that way for me."

"My boy," Cantwell said, spreading his hands and shrugging, "that's business. It might just as well have happened to me."

"Only it didn't," Steve said.

There was a little spot of color beginning to appear in each of Will Cantwell's cheeks. He got up from the desk and his voice had a new harshness in it. "Get to the point, Steve."

"We agreed," Steve Avery said, "among other things, to give the shippers insured transportation. We'd be liable for the freight while it was on our wagons."

"That's right," Cantwell agreed. "That was your first big step toward being a really organized business instead of a jerkline freight outfit."

"Like I used to be," Steve said bitterly.

"Surely you wouldn't want to go back to that, Steve." He said it wide-eyed, as if such a fate would mark a man as untouchable. They were the very words, the very tone of voice Lenore Cantwell would have used. Steve felt that twisting feeling inside him, that feeling that made him want to do things fast.

He said, "I don't know what the hell I want, but I do know this. I ain't got the money to pay off for that stuff that's laying down there in the river and I got no intentions of backing out on a bargain. This is where that 'mutually beneficial' clause in our agreement starts workin' or there'll be some hell poppin' around here."

"Are you threatening me?" There was no mildness in Cantwell's voice.

"I'm not threatening you," Avery said, "I'm telling you. There's that powder and tools for the mine down there and there's that big shipment for Wagner. For the next week or ten days *I'm* doing the hauling—and schedules be damned. After that you and me can straighten it out."

"That's not the way I do business, Steve," Cantwell said softly.

"It's the way I do business," Steve said, "and until I let myself get tangled up with you it worked all right. I just paid for my winter hay and bought another three span of mules. I ain't gonna lose what I got left." He turned quickly and started to leave the office. His hand was on the door knob when Cantwell's voice stopped him.

"Just a minute, Steve."

He turned and saw Cantwell standing behind the desk, his hand resting on the edge of an open drawer. The cigar was gripped tightly in the freight line owner's mouth, giving his face an unyielding look. He said, "I've got a bunch of loaders and handlers down there at the railroad, Steve. They might not understand if you came in and started to take over."

Avery said, "Maybe I got a way of makin' 'em understand. I'm tellin' you to keep your wagons off the road for a week." He went out, slamming the door behind him.

IT WAS not the first time Steve Avery had fought for loads. Ever since that first day he and Harmony had brought a wagon load of whiskey through the Gorge to deliver to a sprawling collection of muddy tents, it had been dog eat dog. Quartzite was young then, lusty and ribald, and its men were still dazzled by the wealth the earth had given them for the taking. Then the Southern Min-

ing and Smelting had come in, taking over the claims in time, sinking the biggest quartz workings in the southern part of the state. Quartzite had settled down to the business of becoming a town, and the lumber interests, farther up the river, added to its growth.

Freighters had come and freighters had gone. Some, tenderfoot speculating outfits, had come with the express purpose of cutting rates until Steve Avery went under. Others came with more direct methods. But in time they left, leaving Avery still whistling atop his wagon, leaving Harmony and his mouth organ. They were as much a part of Quartzite as Belle Collins who ran the saloon and did her own bouncing with the aid of a rolling pin.

Now Belle was gone and the old days were gone. It had happened fast; only a matter of five years. Quartzite today was a prosperous town. Due to its peculiar location the railroad had never considered it when it built out of Fresno, but the town was here to stay with its lumber, its gold, and its ever increasing cattle in the nearby branches. Quartzite was here to stay, and so was Steve Avery and Harmony.

Had Will Cantwell come in as had the others maybe he would have been gone by now; Steve didn't know. But Cantwell came as a business man and he talked like a gentleman. He showed Steve ways of building a permanent business. At the same time he gradually edged himself into the picture. It riled Steve at first, that quick temper of his warning him to look out for trouble. But later he grinned and admitted there was plenty of room for another freight line as long as it was Will Cantwell who ran it. He didn't even balk too much when Cantwell hired Jake Traegor as his boss driver. Steve Avery had met Cantwell's daughter Lenore.

These thoughts went through his head as they had a thousand times before, and as always they left a vague feeling that perhaps what Mary Collins said was right. They were making a jackass out of him. But a jackass had a lot of kick to it when it needed it. He went to the barns back up on the hill and called for Harmony. The Little man scooted down off a bale of hay, anticipation in his eyes.

"Get a couple of teams and wagons ready," Steve ordered. "Have 'em ready to hit the road in an hour. I gotta go over to the hotel and get some stuff, then I'll be back."

"You see Cantwell?"

"I told him we were taking over for a while."

"You let him have one on the nose?"

"I'm saving that kind of stuff for Traegor. Seen him?"

"Not a sign," Harmony said.

"He'll show up," Steve said. "Have those two outfits ready." He hurried up the street toward the two-story hotel half way down the street in the center of town.

It had been a long time since Steve Avery had packed a six-shooter. It felt awkward when he dropped it into the deep pocket of his sheepskin-lined coat. There was one of the printed schedules lying on the stand that held the white enameled wash basin and pitcher. He picked up the paper and tore it in two, then crumpled the pieces into a small and tossed them in the corner of the room. He was slipping on a heavy pair of boots when he heard the light knock on his door. Getting up he went over and opened it. Lenore Cantwell was standing there in the dimly lighted hall, smiling at him.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me in?"

The shock of seeing her standing there, threw him completely offguard. As always, when around her, he felt on the defensive. He stepped aside and let her come into the room.

He said, "I'm sorry about last night, Lenore. But—Lenore, you shouldn't be here!"

There was a sparkle in her brown eyes, a pout on her red lips. She looked at him teasingly. "Shouldn't I?" and she closed the door.

"I was just leaving," he stammered. "I—" She was standing close to him, her body against it. Her perfume was strong. When he looked down at her her head was tilted back, her eyes closed. Her parted lips scarcely moved when she whispered, "Steve. Kiss me."

For Avery, the world ceased to exist. The vision of the wagon at the bottom of the gorge; the body of Tony Casine with that bullet hole in its blood smeared head. These things that had tormented his vision all last night and this morning vanished as if they had never been as his arms went around her and his lips met hers. Her hands were on the back of his neck, fingers caressing him. They moved up the back of his head, entwined in his hair, holding his lips tightly against hers. When he pulled himself away the blood was pounding in his temples.

"Sit down, Steve. I want to talk to you."

HE FORCED himself back to realities, but he couldn't think straight with her standing this close to him. The nearness of her seemed to cloud his senses.

"I just talked to dad," she said. When he started to speak she pressed a finger against his lips. "You were upset Steve, and so was dad. Perhaps you both said things you didn't mean."

He was back to reality now. He got up quickly from the edge of the bed and walked

over by the window. He stared out of it.

"I told your dad everything I had to say," he said.

"But he didn't tell you what he had to say," she said. "You didn't give him a chance. Steve, he'll fire Traeger."

That caught him squarely. He turned toward her, completely offguard. "What?"

She came close again, putting her arms around his neck, leaning her head on his chest. "Dad wants to help you, you and me." She took one of his hands and placed his arm around her waist. "He'll buy you out, Steve. He'll give you Traegor's job."

He felt sudden coldness creeping into him, driving the blood back down from his temples. He continued to stand there, his arm around her, but his eyes had suddenly gone hard. He tried to keep his voice calm.

"But how about us? You had such big plans for us."

"That can come later, Steve, darling." There was a triumphant eagerness in her voice. Like her father her changes were too quick. "This is the best way for all of us, Steve, can't you see?"

He pushed her away from him, roughly. "Yeah, I see," he said flatly. "I see a hell of a lot."

"Steve!"

I see that you're a part of the whole lousy scheme and I've been damn fool enough to go for it!" he snapped. Your dad figured if I got enough stars in my eyes I couldn't see what was happening to me. Well, go on back and tell him it didn't work this time!" His voice rose. "And get out of here quick—before I forget you're a woman!"

She stood back, her eyes suddenly darker. Her full mouth was drawn down at the corners now, making it an ugly slash in her face. The startling beauty he had always seen was gone, replaced by an angular hardness that he would never have thought possible.

He laughed at her. "Trips to New York," he mocked. "The biggest man in the west."

"Steve! Don't be a fool!"

"I've already been," he said. "Get out of my way." He pushed her aside rudely. Then: "You kiss pretty good, Lenore. A few more years practicing on suckers like me and you ought to be right good."

She started to slap him, but he caught her wrist and twisted it savagely. Her face paled, accenting the red of her lips. You filthy pig," she said, her voice low. "I hope you get everything that's coming to you!"

"I will," he said, pushing her back against the bed. "But not the way you think." He went out, leaving the door open behind him. He couldn't make out the words she hurled after him, but when he was out on the street he saw her come out of the hotel and hurry across to her father's office. Steve Avery let himself cuss for a full minute, then walked on over to his own office.

Mary Collins was at her desk and Harmony was leaning back in a chair, his feet on the desk, his harmonica cupped in his hands. He peered up, took one look at Steve and let his feet drop. "What in the good hell's up?" he said.

"What's up?" Steve ranted. "I'll tell you what's up. Get that sawed-off shotgun of yours and toss out my rifle. You and me are gonna drive a couple of wagon loads of freight over the pass and there ain't a man this side of hell can stop us!"

Harmony let out a yelp and made a dive for the closet at the back of the room. Mary Collins ran over and grabbed him by the sleeve. She started jumping up and down like a kid.

Using his daughter for bait to force me out. Sending that slinkin' female around with her bogus honey talk. What the hell kind of a man is he? What the hell does he think I am?" He stopped his pacing across the room. His face was set and white.

"Damn jackass!" he said bitterly. He shrugged his shoulders.

Mary Collins said, "Oh, Steve! You're not. Not any more!" Then she ran over, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the lips.

"Hey," he said. "What's that for?"

"You wouldn't know, you big ox," she said. She was crying.

Harmony tossed the rifle to Steve and caught his double barrel shotgun in the crook of his arm. "Let the damn'd thing roll!" he yelled.

They went out the door together, Steve still muttering under his breath. Together they went up the middle of the muddy street, their boots making sucking sounds. The air was crisp and cold. In Steve Avery there was a trembling, shaky feeling, but mostly he was just plain mad.

"Teach me to run my business, will they?" he muttered. "Make a real big man out of me."

The big fire bell set on its cross arm in front of Wagner's store started to clang wildly. Men came running out of buildings, clerks pulling off aprons, bookkeepers pushing up eyeshades. There was a sudden clamor of voices, the yelling of the volunteers as they headed for their bucket cart. The street filled with people. Then, up on the hill, over the tops of the buildings, the flames became visible. Dimly Steve heard the thunderous yell, "It's Avery's barn!"

Then he and Harmony were running, knocking men aside as they headed for the fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

Return to Scratch

BY THE time Steve and Harmony reached the top of the hill over half the town was crowded around, hampering the work of the bucket brigade, shouting senseless suggestions. The barn, a huge sprawling affair made up of the wagon shed and the hay barn itself, was a torch, the dry siding already gone, the studding standing like a blazing skeleton. Steve and Harmony fought their way through to the big corrals where a dozen mules plunged against the fence, their eyes rolling.

Men helped them rip down the fence rails and the mules, crazy with fear, turned and headed for the burning barn. Steve threw himself in front of them, waving his arms and yelling. They turned, knocking him down in the mud, then whirled and went out through the opening in the fence. People scattered, falling over one another, as the mules bunched and went thundering out across the flat grass land in back of town.

Steve then turned his attention to his wagons. His drivers had pulled the two rigs he had ordered ready to safety, but his other two wagons were still in the barn, and while he watched the roof of the wagon shed caved in with a towering column of sparks and the hungry flames licked across the dry beds of the wagons and raced up to envelop the high seats. A wall crumpled and there was nothing but fire and black smoke.

He gave up then, for the barn was lost. Along with it had gone his extra harness, his winter hay supply and his two extra wagons. It would take days to round up the wild-eyed mules, heading the way they had into the rough country across the river. His face streaked with soot, his clothes covered with mud, he looked at Harmony and shrugged his shoulders. They were back where they started; broke, with two empty wagons and twelve mules. Harmony extended his hand, forced a grin and said, "Hi, pardner."

Steve went back through the crowd and walked over to where one wagon stood. Climbing on the seat he unwrapped the lines from around the brake and turned the team back toward the crowd. The mules balked at going into the mass of people but Steve handled them like a master. The jangling of their bell harness, the tug of the lines in his hands, the familiar roll of the wheels, all this served to give him confidence in the thing he was about to do. He pulled the team up sharp and stood up. The crowd quieted and waited.

"Folks," Steve began quietly, "you all know me and Harmony. We come in here about six years ago with a couple of loads of whiskey and little else and announced we was going in the freighting business. You folks were right good to us. We hauled your stuff, charged fair rates, and we got your stuff through. We asked no favors of nobody, but I'm gonna ask a favor now."

There were a few muttered comments throughout the crowd. He saw that Harmony had got the other wagon and was pulling it up alongside. He spotted Ben Farnsworth, Superintendent for the Southern Mining and Smelting. Bert Wagner, who owned the biggest general merchandise store in town. Smitty, who had the livery barn and feed store. Steve counted them all as friends in spite of the fact that Cantwell had been getting most of their business lately. He sort of singled them out now.

"Ben Farnsworth," Steve said, "you got a couple loads of powder and tools down at the railroad. Wagner, I know you got stuff you're anxious to have. You always got feed to haul, Smitty—" The crowd waited expectantly. Harmony had his wagon pulled to a stop now. He had picked up his shotgun and held it in the crook of his arm.

"I lost a wagon last night," Steve said. "First time it ever happened to me. I mean to make good for every pound that was on that wagon. Today I had a chance to sell out to Cantwell. It would have given me the money I need, but I ain't gonna do it that way. You see, what some of you don't know is that Tony Casine didn't run off the road last night. He was murdered. Shot in the back of the head by the same people that set this barn afire. I say it was Jake Traegor and the man he works for, and if they want to deny it, let 'em step up here now and do it!"

THERE was a quick intake of breath, a flurry of excitement. Steve heard Traegor's name being repeated, over and over, then a bearded miner yelled, "I seen Traegor not a half hour ago!"

"He was up here by the barn," another volunteered.

Steve waved them to silence. "Boys," he said calmly, "I'm wiped out. All I got is two wagons and me and Harmony to drive 'em, but with your help that still makes the best damn freight line that ever come to Quartzite. I'm askin' for your business. All of it. And I need it now."

He heard Smitty's voice yell, "I'm with you, Steve!" He saw Bert Wagner, always conservative, hanging back. Ben Farnsworth stepped forward and turned to the crowd.

"If Steve Avery has got guts enough to haul dynamite over Devil's Gorge after the accusations he just made, I've sure as hell got the guts to let him," the mine boss said.

"Count me in." There was a roar of approval from the crowd. Then a sharp silence, broken by a high-pitched voice.

"There goes Traegor!"

Men pushed and shoved to get a better look. Down the main street a hatless figure, coat-tails flying, was riding a mud-spattered horse at a full gallop. Steve snatched up his rifle and threw it to his shoulder, but the milling crowd kept getting in his way. Traegor disappeared, headed in the direction of Devil's Gorge. Steve put down the rifle and turned to Harmony. "Let 'em roll!" he yelled, and the two men tooled their wagons through the crowd, down toward the road.

Steve hardly noticed the six men who piled on the tailgates of the wagons. He knew his two drivers were there and the blacksmith who worked for him. Money or no, they were sticking. Out of the tail of his eye he recognized Mulrooney, the bartender who used to work for Belle Collins. A hard lump kept coming up in his throat. For the first time in months he felt like himself, as if he belonged and was part and parcel of all this. Those men who had given him a vote of confidence along with their business; and now these men on the wagon. He started to whistle, though he had trouble keeping his lips shaped right. The bell harness jangled and from the wagon in back of him he heard the strains of Harmony's mouth organ.

It was raining again by the time they reached the top of the hill and started down the winding one-way road through the gorge. Particles of sleet cut their faces and the red road clay took on the character of greased ice. The steam from the mules' backs curled up and their breaths made a bobbing fog in front of their noses. The jangle of the bell harness was sharp in the crisp air. From time to time Avery leaned over the side or stood up to study the roadway. A horse had passed this way recently. The hoof prints were not yet full of water and what water there was in them was riled and muddy. Jake Traegor would have a reception committee waiting for them at the railroad.

Steve let his mules pick their way around Devil's Elbow. The road was cut with tracks where the men had worked last night and there were a few sticks of half-burned wood where Mary had made coffee. The marks where they had hoisted Tony's body were still apparent. Steve got sick to his stomach when he looked over the side into the black space where the river churned on the jagged rocks. The picture of that wreckage down there, that broken body, kept coming before his eyes, leaving him weak. To himself he said, "I'll make it up to you, Tony. So help me God I will."

The wagons rounded the Elbow, then made the two broad turns below. Here was the only turn-out on the grade; a wide spot with a horse trough. The bank on the upper side of the road was low here and a sort of trail, formed by an outcropping of granite, led to the more level hillside above the road. It was here they had turned the buckboard last night. From here on the road was steep but fairly straight. And now there was only the mark of that single horse in the mud.

But Traegor was not at the railroad. Neither were any Cantwell men who usually were there to help load. Two Mexican section hands and the station master were the only ones visible. Avery stopped his wagon, took his rifle and went ahead alone.

"Traegor?" the old station master said in answer to his question. "Yeah, seems he was here 'bout a half hour ago. Him and them other fellers went off someplace. I jest figgered the road was too slick for haulin' today."

"Thanks," Steve said. "Get out the bills of lading and let's get going on this stuff. I got my own crew to load it."

MULROONEY complained bitterly as he hoisted cases of giant powder onto the wagons. "I thought maybe there'd be some fightin'," he whined. "Now look at me, gruntin' and strainin' I am over somethin' a man can't eat nor drink."

"A lot of good you'd be in a fight anyway, Mulrooney," another man puffed as he dropped a hundred-pound sack of barley on Harmony's wagon.

"Now is thet so?" Mulrooney said, putting up his fists. "And maybe you'd be likin' to come back up that statement?"

"Save it boys," Avery grinned. "We're a long way from home."

Since Traegor and his crew was not here the conviction was growing in Avery that Jake was going to make his stand after the wagons were loaded. It would throw Steve and Harmony at a disadvantage that way, making it a surprise and catching them when they had the teams to handle. Steve hadn't given Traegor credit for any such planning. Traegor was a man who plunged into things without much forethought. It was a more serious outlook now, but for some reason Avery felt downright good.

But that feeling had pretty much left him by the time the two heavily-loaded wagons had reached the turn-out there below Devil's Elbow. The men had grown silent too, and even Mulrooney had quit his Badgering. Steve pulled his wagon in, making room for Harmony, and he looked back at the little redhead working his team into the turnout. The same worry he felt was mirrored in Harmony's eyes. Coming this far without trouble meant

one of two things. Either Traegor had given up or else he and his men were waiting there at Devil's Elbow. Harmony said, "I think I'll climb up the bank and take a look."

"Watch yourself," Steve warned.

Ten minutes later Harmony came sliding back down the bank. He nodded his head to Steve's questioning look. "They're there, all right," he said. "Eight of 'em. They got guns and they're lined up in the road, waitin'."

"They know we're giving the teams a rest here in the turnout," Steve said. He cursed under his breath. To drive those two loaded wagons around that bend would be suicide. But he had made a promise that he had to keep. It was either get this stuff into Quartzite or leave the country for good. He said, "You see Jake?"

"He's there," Harmony said. "I heard him say he'd give us another ten minutes in the turnout, then if we didn't start up they'd rush us here."

"Don't leave us much choice, does it?" Steve said.

"Meanin'?"

"We'll go up there."

Harmony moved close to Steve and pretended to tighten a harness strap on his off-wheeler. Out of the side of his mouth he said, "We can't ask these men to go chargin' up the road there, Steve. This ain't no army. What with Jake bein' above us, all set the way he is. There'd be hell to pay, Steve."

"I figured on half of us coming in from above them," Steve said. "That would give the rest of us a chance."

"You wouldn't have time, Steve."

"We would if Traegor thought we were driving the wagons on up."

"I don't get it."

"Get the boys to give you a hand unharnessing your team," Steve ordered.

By the time the six mules were unharnessed Harmony had gotten the idea and was chuckling. Steve picked three men, including Mulrooney, to stay with Harmony. The other three he motioned to follow him up the bank over the trail Harmony had taken when he went to spy on Traegor. As they reached the top he heard Harmony yelling at the mules, then the sharp jangle of the bell harness cut through the air. He looked back down and smiled grimly. Harmony and his three men had the harness draped around themselves and were shaking and jumping up and down. He heard Mulrooney say, "I come to fight, and what am I? A damn bell-ringin' jackass."

"It won't hurt you none," Steve called softly. "I been one for two months. Just keep that harness ringin' and when you hear the word, come a runnin'."

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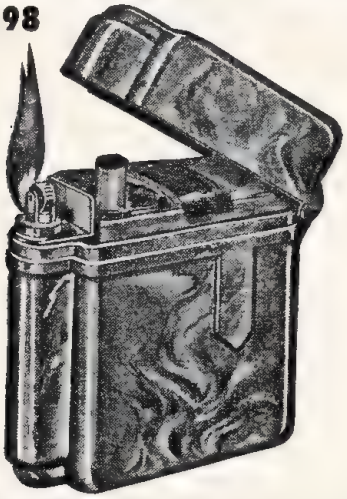

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CHAPTER FIVE

Last Fight

STEVE and his three partners wormed their way up across the high shoulder that formed the cliff at Devil's Elbow, then inched down the other side. The brush was thick here, low-growing manzanita and buckbrush, loaded with water that poured on them as they crawled along on their bellies through the rotted leaves. Near the bottom they worked their way out to where the bank of the road was only about twenty feet high, and there they saw Traegor.

He was squatted on a rock, a rifle across his knees, an unlighted cigarette hanging soggily from his lips. He was still hatless and the rain had plastered his hair close to his head, giving him an apish look. He was speaking softly to the seven men there in the road below him.

"Sounds like just one wagon," Jake whispered hoarsely, cocking his head to catch the faint sounds of the bell harness. "That'll be Avery hisself. He was in the lead. Leave him to me when he rounds that turn, then start raisin' hell and get them mules out of hand."

Steve felt a hard cold lump forming in the pit of his stomach. He crawled back in the brsuh and signaled his men to come close. "Take this," he said to one, shoving the rifle into his hands. "And here!" He fished into his pocket and took out the heavy .44 he had placed there. The third man was already armed. "Go on across that wash and drop down into the road about a hundred yards up. When you see me start it, give 'em everything you got!"

The three men were tight-lipped. In their eyes Steve could see his own thoughts. They were thinking of a harmless old teamster named Tony Casine and they were thinking of six mules and a smashed wagon. Tony had never had a chance.

One of them said, "How about you, Steve?"

"That's my job out there," Steve said, jerking his head toward Traegor's crouching figure.

They crawled through the brush, dropping swiftly toward the bottom of the small gully that cut down to the road. He waited until he was sure they were on the road, then he crawled out of the brush, inched his way carefully down the bank toward Traegor, then stood up, not ten feet away.

He said, "This is the way you got Tony, eh, Traegor?"

The man on the rock nearly lost his balance, jerking around. He slipped, got to one knee and brought up the rifle. Steve made a dive

over the bank and he felt the burn of the powder as his arms closed around Traegor. For a second they hung there, swaying on the unstable footing, then they toppled over the brink and slid to the roadway, twenty feet below.

They were covered with slime and mud, the breath knocked out of them, but both men knew this was the last fight for one of them and they clawed and kicked like wild animals. Each blow seemed to slip off harmlessly, but there was a smear of blood showing through the mud on Traegor's face. Steve heard the first volley of fire from the three men up the road, the startled yells of the Traegor men. And in the shattering split second of silence that followed the harness bells quit ringing and Steve knew Harmony and his three were on the way. A blow from Traegor's fist stunned him back to the business at hand. He spat out a mouthful of dirt and blood and, lowering his head, he went after Traegor.

Steve slipped and he went down, but he took Jake with him. Jake's knee came up and caught him in the groin, sending sickening pain through him. He saw Jake's eyes, rolling wildly, and he gouged a thumb into one of them.

They rolled, scratching, biting, gouging. It was kill or be killed, and the weapons were bare hands. Over them lead whined and above them and below them men yelled. Once Steve caught sight of four men on mules come charging around the lower curve, guns blazing, and he knew that Harmony was all right.

He worked one hand free, reaching for a rock, and his hand met space. Twisting, he saw they were at the far edge of the road, with nothing but a hundred-foot drop between them and Kern River below. Steve twisted his body free and slid back toward the middle of the road. He staggered to his feet, slipped, then got up again, just as Traegor stood up and struck at his face.

Steve ducked. It went over his head. And in the second that Traegor was off balance Steve hit him. Pain ripped up his arm and he knew he had broken his hand, but Traegor was standing at the edge of the cliff, his mouth open. Before Steve could hit him again Traegor started to weave. His hands came up feebly. His mouth started to work. Then he toppled backwards, over the lip of the cliff.

Steve stood there, sick. There was pain in every part of his body and his right hand was beginning to throb. Everything was strangely silent. He looked around and saw Harmony, Mulrooney and the others. They had their guns pressed into the backs of four men. There in the mud were three things that had been alive, seconds before. Steve staggered across the

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road and sat down on a rock. He began to retch violently.

THEY made Quartzite before dark, two loaded wagons. On top of Steve's load were three dead men. On top of Harmony's guarded by Mulrooney, were four men who muttered to themselves. There was a light in Will Cantwell's office. They saw Cantwell come out, his velvet coat collar pulled high, his beaver hat on his head. He took one look at the wagons, then jumped into his waiting buggy and lashed the horse up the street toward his home.

One of the men said, "Shall we get him now, Steve?"

A sickness came over Steve Avery. If he had been a man who could have cried he thought perhaps he might have done it now. He shook his head and said, "I want to handle that alone."

"Sure, Steve," the man said.

He waited only to see the mules unharnessed, then he went to his hotel. Taking a towel he wiped most of the blood and dirt off his face, then he washed, taking his time. He had a bottle of linamint there, and he worked some of the fiery liquid into his swollen hand. He kept moving his fingers and decided the hand was not broken. After that he went to a bureau drawer and took out a small caliber pistol. He went downstairs and out on the street and started that familiar walk toward Cantwell's house. Men saw him but said nothing.

He kept his hand on the gun when he knocked at Cantwell's door. There were lights inside, and he heard Cantwell's step. He stood to one side, every nerve throbbing. Cantwell opened the door and stood there, his hands in plain sight in front of him.

"I was expecting you, Steve," he said wearily.

The man looked old. His usually ruddy cheeks were gray, his lips blue. He was shaking as if with a chill. Behind him, there at the foot of the stairs, Steve saw Lenore. Her arms were straight down at her sides, her hands clenched until the knuckles were white. Her eyes were dead, her lips bloodless. She said nothing.

Everything was spinning around him as Steve gripped the gun in his pocket. He noticed finally that his hand was hurting. He released the gun and took his hand out of his pocket. He did not recognize his voice when he said, "Four men paid for Tony's life tonight. That's enough. Get out of town, Cantwell. Get out fast!"

He saw Cantwell stumbling over himself in his haste to get through the door. Lenore paused long enough to pick up one small suitcase, then she too came out. Near Steve she

stopped, and he could smell a faint trace of that perfume. It only sickened him. She said, "It was a game, mule-skinner, that's all. You had the cards."

Then she was gone and when he could think straight again the buggy was going down the muddy street, the horse at a fast trot.

Steve went back to his own office then. Mary was there, as he knew she would be. And slouched in a chair, his feet on the desk, Harmony was busy with his harmonica.

The silence of Mary, the steady drone of Harmony's harmonica, got under his skin. He took two strides, bringing him close to Mary's desk. He said, "Well, why don't you say something? Why don't you give me hell?"

He sat down at his desk and gradually the sickness left him. He saw the familiar calendar on the wall, heard the measured ticking of the clock. Slowly a feeling of well-being started to grow in him, a feeling of ease. And he got to thinking that it was always this way when he was around Mary.

That set him thinking about her. He remembered how she had gone with the men last night. How she had made coffee for them. How she was always around when a man needed her. And that made him remember that she had kissed him that morning.

He kept right on thinking about that. There was something about that kiss that was different. It wasn't like the kisses Lenore Cantwell had given him.

Then he remembered he was back at the old way of doing things now. If a man wanted to find out something he should get at it. He got up quickly, went over, took her in his arms and kissed her. When he let her go her eyes were bright and round. Her lips were sort of puckered up like she was going to say "Oh" as soon as she got her breath.

She kept right on crying. She said, "You great big wonderful dumb ox!" That didn't make much sense either, but he was beginning to like having her so close to him this way. Make a man feel comfortable. He started stroking her hair, then he looked up and saw Harmony.

Harmony had put the mouth organ on the desk. He had taken out a blue bandanna and was honking his nose loudly. He kept batting his eyes, real fast. They seemed to be sort of red.

Steve said, "What's the matter with you?"

Harmony gave a loud *honk* into the handkerchief. Then he put it back in his pocket and said, "Must of caught a cold last night. Think I'll go get us some sandwiches and coffee."

He went out hurriedly, leaving Steve and Mary there alone.

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(Continued from page 6)

high peaks to gold. Quick flick of a white tail. Sun glinting off a hatrack. Gotta be faster than that, boy. I'm running for another look but he's gone, his tracks leading into the canyon. A track four by two and a half. Weigh two fifty if an ounce. Will he follow the canyon or climb the far slope? Pussyfooting ahead. Watching the parallel ridge like a hawk. A rat can't escape my eagle glance, but the buck does. Yonder he shows, at the top. Two steps to go and he's taking the first one as I shoot. He leaps, and is gone. Did I hit him? The answer will cost me. Slipping, sliding into the bottom. Slogging up the murderous slope—a sea-level man gasping for oxygen at 8500 feet. Hang on, old heart. Pounding out Westerns was never like this. Buck tracks leading strongly away from the ridge. I missed. Oh well, it was five hundred yards and there are eleven days to go. I may not get the first one, but he'll be the biggest.

Big guns waking echoes on peaks and ridges. Meet a hunter who has counted forty hunters and no bucks. We console each other. Twenty miles over ridges and along canyons. Drag my weary feet back to camp. Two bucks hanging, a ten-pointer and a stingy three-pointer. Liver and bacon for supper. When did bed ever feel so good?

Up at dawn for ham and eggs. Spirit undaunted. Fifteen miles, and they come hard. Return to camp bringing what the little boy shot at. An all day fusillade all around me and not a thing to shoot at. Sore legs and galled feet. Cripes.

Another day and no bucks sighted. My luck is foul, at hunting and at poker. Back to camp to find four bucks hanging. Three days and we're half filled.

Another bleak morning, with snow spitting. Jump a bunch of bucks from their warm beds. Get a running shot; miss it. Roll under a barbwire drift fence, the lower strand clanging. Four bucks jump from cover. Before I can get organized they are gone. I just don't live right. Five bucks hanging when I return, another seven-pointer. Regale the boys with son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack and apple cobbler. Their unstinted praise heals bruised feelings—sort of. I'm clinging to straws. Tomorrow is another day.

Hit the high spots next day, only a shadow of my former self. Get a long running shot. Too long. No meat. I spend a

mercy shot on a crippled doe. Damn those Navaho hunters. To them deer is deer. Following the Apache war trail today, walking with history and its lights. Here rode Geronimo and his renegades, shifting from the hogans of the Warm Springs to those of the Coyoteros. Here rode Wales Arnold, Cooney, Cooley, Al Seiber, Tom Horn and other scouts. Here echoed the passage of Crook and his flying columns, bent upon reducing the ardor of the hostile Apaches. Here, for seventy years, have trod those reliving their youth in the excitement of the hunt, by those extending their years with strong red venison. Here the gods of the hunt smiled on a tired pilgrim.

Shots rattling below me. A high yell: "Coming at you, Pete. A biggie!" But Pete is somewhere else and your scrivener in on the ridge. Ajax defying the lightning. Crash of brush. Rataplan of flying hoofs. He parts the scrub with his backthrown horns. Gun stock cuddled at my cheek. Through the peep the gold bead splits his shoulder and . . . I hesitate. What magnificence. Flying uphill like a bird. Straining nerve and muscle to escape this twelve-day terror. Civilization is more than a veneer. Moments tick away. Admiration. Pity. Hasn't there been enough killing? Aren't there enough bucks hung at camp? Easy shooting chances slipping away. What will the forest be without this monarch?

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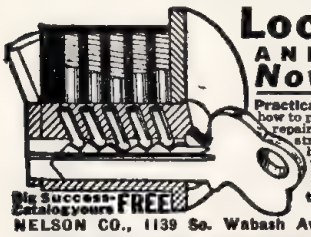

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Again my bead covers him. My shot snarls through the timber. Buck stumbling, regaining his feet, lunging twice and collapsing. His eyes glare defiance. The knife sinks deep. More blood staining a trail long inured to blood.

I straighten, breathing hard. A proud hunter standing over his kill, hands red with gore, purpose justified. A monarch fallen to his skill. But where is the pride? Look well at the picture. Which do you prefer—the hunter or the deer? The buck, eh? Me, too. The chef in me comes out. Here is strong red meat for strong, virile men. Another liver for the evening meal. Steaks and chops, fat ribs and roasts, browned to a turn. Mmmmm. My luck has changed. Tonight I'll run those would-be poker players to their holes. Hey, you lusty sons, who'll give me a hand with this hundred and seventy-five pounds? Those three miles to camp will stretch to twenty under the load. Hey!

A big day. Eight bucks hanging in camp. We've filled. Sheath 'em in wool sacks, boys, and strike camp. Storm's over and we're going home. Season's over for us. *Adios,* ridges. You take it out of a fellow and you put it back. Be kind to that crop of fawns and spikes, for we're coming back next year for more blood, more meat, more of the cruel man stuff that is slowly dying out of our civilization.

Thanks, Harry. We're sure the retelling of some of your experiences make many of our readers envious that they, too, cannot, for various reasons, be in your shoes. That was a real, hard-hitting, man-sized thrill. Thanks again, and we'll be seeing you in the next issue —out March 12th!

(Continued from page 91)

The boy listened carefully to the tragic account, his face, as ever, an impassive blank.

"I, or one of my men, killed your father—and your mother. I do not expect the Lord to forgive me for it, but it was done. I have tried to make it up to you," the old man finished.

Thomas sat for the rest of the night staring thoughtfully into the flickering fire. When morning came, the major was dead. The boy went outside and saddled the Major's horse—his, now.

"The ranch is yours, too," murmured a sympathetic neighbor. "At least your father left you well provided for."

Thomas glanced around the thriving spread and smiled thinly. Then he rode off, rapidly, to the North.

ONCE A REDSKIN—

The Cherokees were on the warpath again that spring. In a last desperate bid to hold their ancient hunting grounds, they ran wild over the countryside, burning and pillaging. With them was a new leader, young and lithe, on a black horse that bore an Army brand. He knew the location of every white outpost in Oklahoma and exactly how many guns were at each ranch. He was dangerous.

"He must be a renegade," the settlers told each other. Then, slowly the old timers remembered the strange impulse of Major Snider MacWilliams and the Indian papoose he had raised as his own.

"Wind-On-a-Horse" was his Indian name, and soon there was a healthy price on his scalp throughout the Territory. By midsummer, the raided area had spread down into middle Oklahoma and was sweeping up the section where the Cherokee warrior had been raised as a white boy. One morning, he rode his horse over a small rise and saw before him his own house.

At sunrise, Thomas (Wind-On-a-Horse) MacWilliams sent the MacWilliams ranch house up in smoke, exploding nearly a ton of precious gunpowder that had been cached in the cellar. The crime could hardly be called an act of war, nor even arson, for the house was his. It was unusual for the owner of a prosperous ranch to set a torch to it, but Thomas MacWilliams was an unusual boy. The price on his head went higher.

In September of that same year, a corporal in the Army collected the bounty. In a surprise swoop, a small body of troops dashed down on a Cherokee village, slaughtered warriors, women and children, and reduced the camp to ashes. Thomas (Wind-On-a-Horse) MacWilliams was among them, and this time there was not even a single papoose left to seek vengeance for his people in the years to come.

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(Continued from page 55)

the race. That night the flood gate was again opened. It was closed on the morning of January 24. In the tailrace Marshall found, on the exposed rocks, below the level of the water, the glittering particles that meant gold had been struck in California.

But Marshall didn't stop there. A year later the man discovered another gold strike on Deer Creek, Nevada City, about sixty miles northeast of Sacramento.

Some boy, that Marshall!

Bounty Hunters

Marion Wilson, of Nashville, Tennessee, has a word to offer to present day ranchers and farmers about the increase in pests and livestock destroyers.

Dear Strawboss:

Although I wouldn't want to go so far as to say a skunk is a predatory animal, it remains on the records that, during the early days of Dodge City, Kansas, the bite of this weasel-like mammal was responsible for the death of a dozen men. Which lets me get off to what I'm trying to tell present day small ranchers and farmers: namely, that predatory animals—particularly the coyote—are increasing rapidly throughout the West.

The coyote is an ornery varmint which in recent years has taken up where the wolves left off. Horses, calves, swine and sheep are all good meat on the table for the coyote—especially sheep. In the old days it was common for punchers (punchers, because occasionally an almost helpless calf was attacked) to carry strychnine and dope the carcasses of animals, hoping in that way to get the killer. Of late, however, coyotes are killed by professional trappers and hunters. The hunters concentrate on finding coyote lairs and then getting rid of the cubs.

Coyote and predatory animal increase began around 1931 and 1932 when the price of animal furs fell off violently. In 1922 coyote pelts sold for fifteen dollars a piece. In the 30s the price fell to one dollar. During the last war the Army and Navy grabbed off hunters and trappers and traps were hard to get and ammunition scarce. Now, once again, pests of agriculture are on the increase, and their pelts are worth more. So it's about time for farmers and private and state agencies to get on the ball and do something.

Another mail pouch next month. See you then, punchers!

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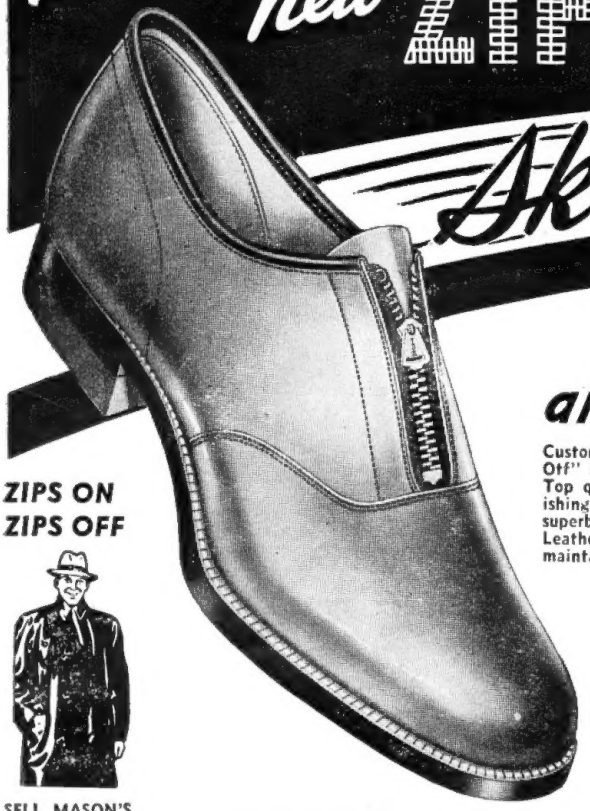

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